

Eyes of Rikkai

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Entering the best school in tennis seemed like a good idea at the time, but Ryoma was never meant for Rikkai. "Echizen Ryoma had issued his challenge to Rikkai Dai and to the world. His eyes glowed in anticipation, saying, 'Mada mada da ne.'" Angsty.

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Echizen Ryoma vs The World

Disclaimer: All characters belong to Takeshi Konomi

Warnings: Spoilers for the entire series and mature-ish language

Notes: I made some (a lot of) changes to the set up, but they're explained in the story. Like how they're in high school, not middle school. No romance, meaning no pairings.

Chapter One: Echizen Ryoma vs The World

"This place smells tasty!" Kikumaru said upon sticking his head through the open doorway. "Let's eat here." He bounced into the restaurant, the other juniors and freshmen leisurely following behind him.

"It's a bit greasier than I would have liked..." Oishi remarked a bit cautiously. Indeed, judging from the food on other people's tables, the meals were quite unhealthy, swimming in strange oily juices.

"Live a little, senpai," Momoshiro said, waving off Oishi's worries. He sat himself down at a large booth, gesturing for his teammates to do the same. All eight of them sat themselves down heavily, some moreso than others. Tezuka hadn't said a word since they had lost, but the Seigaku tennis team was smarter than to think Tezuka could be giving them the silent treatment. Their vice captain was probably just trying to think of why they lost and how they could prevent it from happening again.

Kawamura sighed. He was tired and hungry. Usually they would go to his sushi restaurant, but that had become a place only for celebration. They all agreed that the restaurant was reserved for victory, not failure. Moreover, because they weren't at his father's

restaurant, he knew they wouldn't want to order anything expensive. This food would not be free.

"We all played very well, though," Fuji commiserated, patting Kikumaru's head. The redhead had his elbows on the table while the heels of his palms held up his heavy and weary head.

"How could we have lost?" he complained loudly.

"Excuse me," a terse voice intoned. All eight looked up to see a young boy, surely no older than thirteen, standing before their table with a white baseball cap casting a shadow on his annoyed expression.

"Yeah?" Momo asked quite rudely. What did this young punk want? Said punk looked at him blankly. "What's your order?" he asked.

Kaidoh glared at the young kid. "Are you supposed to be our waiter?" he asked, or more accurately, hissed. The boy was surely too young to be working.

"Yes. Drinks? Appetizers?" he continued concisely.

Most of the team was flustered. Kikumaru, probably wanting to keep the intriguing boy there as long as possible, asked, "What drinks are there?"

The boy looked exasperated and listed a bunch of drinks: the usual water, iced tea, and assortment of carbonated beverages. There was a prolonged silence in which the more unsubtle tennis players merely stared at the young man and the more polite players wondered why there was such a silence in the first place.

"I'll have water," Tezuka said first to get his teammates started.

Oishi sent a relieved smile over to Tezuka. "Ah, water for me as well."

"You don't have juice?" Kikumaru pouted. He didn't want a soda that would keep him wired all night. Soda was a victory drink. Juice was a healthy but tasty alternative for this occasion, he thought to himself.

"We might," the boy said simply, his eyes lazily floated their gaze around the room as if he were bored. He looked back up at them and raised an eyebrow. "Well?"

"Just get me water," Kaidoh growled. The kid was rude, he thought. It didn't surprise him that such a greasy, dirty diner would hire a brat like him.

Momoshiro rolled his eyes and smiled at their waiter. "Ignore his rudeness," he said, glaring at Kaidoh. "I'll have coke."

Kawamura and Inui both ordered water as Fuji looked at their waiter, apparently dissatisfied. Of course, no one could really figure out what could be running through the genius's mind at any given moment.

"How old are you?" he asked bluntly. Even Tezuka could not hide his surprise at Fuji's lack of decorum.

"Fujiko!" surprisingly, it was Kikumaru who called him out on his rudeness.

"I'll just get you water," the boy said neutrally, walking away.

"Fujiko!" Kikumaru whined again.

"Saa, Kikumaru, I was just curious." Fuji smiled and leaned back into the booth. The smile, of course, meant nothing good, but none of the regulars or freshmen could do a thing about it. Conversation did not come easily after a defeat, especially since they had come so far. This year was the first time in ages that Seishun Gakuen had made it to the Nationals, though that in itself was a surprising accomplishment.

"You guys should be proud of yourselves!" Momoshiro declared. "Before you guys, the team didn't have a chance at even getting to Kantou!"

Oishi chuckled and glanced at Tezuka. "You mean, before Tezuka. Last year, they made it to Kantou."

Kikumarū rolled his eyes. "Yeah, because they had Yamoto-senpai *and* Tezuka! I'm surprised we even made it, with only the juniors as talent."

"Eiji!" Oishi scolded him.

"What? The third years this year all suck. Tezuka should be captain, and you all should be regulars, ne, Taka?" Kikumarū said, elbowing the mild-mannered Kawamura.

"Eh? I don't know if I'd be good enough to be a regular," Kawamura said, scratching the back of his head. His meekness was a misleading personality trait that seemed to disappear on the court. Once he had a tennis racket in hand, it was obvious to everyone that he ought to have been a regular that year.

"Of course you are," Fuji answered. "I must agree with Kikumarū. Taka is very talented, and could have easily beat some of the seniors. None of our senpai are as good as you, Tezuka. And none of the doubles are as great a team as Kikumarū and Oishi."

"You know, we'd have one less idiot on the regular team if you'd just apply yourself, Fuji-senpai," Kaidoh said simply. It was a miracle that they even had Kaidoh there. He was well-known for being a loner, and they had only barely managed to rope him into having dinner with them.

"No fun in that. Maybe at this next ranking match, I'll try. After all, it seems that Yuuta is settling into St. Rudolph," Fuji said happily, his tight smile the only indicator of how much he detested the thought of his little brother at another school. Yuuta hadn't even made it to the

second month before he dropped out of the tennis club. He had left Seigaku by the third month.

Tezuka looked over at the assorted people at the table. Such a strange group. He knew, after talking to their current captain, that he would be taking the reigns once the third years moved on to college. "Next year, we'll beat Rikkai Dai. That freshman with the red eyes won't be nearly as much of a surprise. Though I did think he used some underhanded tactics."

"Damn straight!" Momo almost shouted, "That kid-"

"Is your age. And therefore not a kid to you," Kaidoh interrupted and took a sip of water. Wait, when did the drinks arrive? He looked around at the table and realized that all the drinks were perfectly placed before each of them, even though it seemed no one had noticed their waiter breeze by.

"As I was saying, that Kirihara guy was totally aiming for the body parts. He was purposely trying to incapacitate the other player! And to think they paired him up with Sugiyama-buchou! Cocky bas-"

Oishi clamped a hand over his kohai's mouth. "I also found it insulting that they matched their freshman player against the player who, from an outsider's perspective, should've been our best. Especially in the Nationals. But next year, we'll get them."

"They won the nationals last year as well. They've won the Kanto Regionals for fourteen straight years. This year will be their fifteenth," Inui suddenly joined the conversation. "From what I've deduced of the other teams, they don't stand a chance. Makinofuji Gakuen only has one good doubles team and their second year players seem very inexperienced. Though without their two best players, Chitose Senri and Tachibana Kippe, I don't see how Shishigaku could stand a chance against Makinofuji. And although Rikkai Dai is losing Nishiki, their second year players will more than make up for his loss."

Kikumaru scratched his head. "Meaning..."

"Makinofuji will win against Shishigaku in the semifinals but lose to Rikkai Dai in the finals," Inui finished confidently.

"Do you know what you'll order?" The boy who had taken their drink orders was back. He still looked as young as ever, but some of the players thought it suspect; the kid was swift and his eyes were tired. The silence that had been put on hold when the boy had left suddenly rose again, choking all nine of them. There was no logical reason for the hold up, but it seemed that no one was willing to break the awkward quiet.

"I don't have all night," the boy said rudely, glancing at his watch. "And neither do you. The diner closes at midnight." Maybe the boy himself was what killed all conversation. His sharp eyes and impatience were certainly off-putting enough.

Kikumaru jerked around, probably to check his own watch. In an instant, they all saw in slow motion as his stray hand knocked into a glass of bright yellow orange juice. In the next anticlimactic moment, the waiter simply caught the glass and righted it effortlessly, with nary a drop spilled.

"Well, we never got menus," Kawamura said reasonably, somewhat surprised at the boy's show of speed. It was true, that they were never offered menus, but it was also true that they had neither asked for menus nor looked for them.

The boy blinked at them once or twice, and the second-year had to stifle a laugh at the boy's bemused face that was quickly turning exasperated. "You mean, *those* menus?" the boy asked, pointing at a stack of menus at the end of their booth near the window. It probably hadn't helped that the unapproachable Kaidoh had been sitting near the window across from the stoic Tezuka-who might or might not have been blushing in embarrassment.

"Oh." It wasn't clear who said the word, but it was clear that they were all thinking it.

"I'll be back in five minutes," the boy said deadpan, knowing that their own knowledge of their oversight was better than any derogatory comment he could invent. Besides, he wanted to talk to the idiots as little as possible.

"We're quite astute," Fuji said with a smile. "Hm. His eyes are brilliant." His sarcasm was always hard to identify because of his immovable smile, but in this situation, it was obvious. As for his observation about his eyes, well, it was Fuji. No one was sure what his sexual orientation was anyway. He grabbed a menu and decided to order the tastiest thing on there.

"What're you ordering, Fuji-senpai?" Momoshiro asked after looking at the number of unhealthy items listed on the cheap plastic menus.

"A3. Looks good," Fuji answered with a smile. The tennis players all paled magnificently once they glanced at their own menus.

"Eh? Fujiko, that's the Heart Attack Heat Burger!" Kikumaru pouted. He was accustomed to Fuji's eccentric taste, but this seemed like it was pushing some sort of boundary.

"Sounds good, doesn't it?"

So. Tired.

He performed his tasks by rote, keeping a list of things he needed to do turning in his head. He couldn't risk forgetting a single thing.

Get dinner

Do summer homework

Wash clothes

Feed Karupin

Help Kaa-san.

What was that other one? There must have been something else. Oh yeah, groceries, he thought. He absentmindedly stuck his hand in his pocket and jingled the change. No bills. Was today a pay day? No, it was close but he wasn't paid until the end of the month. And judging by the lightness in both his pockets, it seemed he had little left from the previous month's money.

Did Kaa-san get paid yet? He wondered. Most of her money went to the remainder of her medical bills that weren't completely covered by the healthcare system, so that was out. Oh, he cursed, he still hadn't sent in the down payment for tuition. How long could Rikkai Dai Fuzoku wait for him? He didn't have to pay much-after all, Ryoma was quiet but he wasn't stupid. And Rikkai Dai would apparently do anything for a great tennis player who also had a good brain.

Even though he was a freshman.

"We're ready to order, waiter-san!" the hyper redhead shouted from across the diner. Ryoma growled, not for the first time, that it sucked living in a country where tipping was not a common courtesy. He remembered eating at restaurants in America as a child and leaving a dollar or two on the table. Back then, he didn't think it could make a difference, but after a full day of dealing with insufferable adults and arrogant kids, a dollar per table would have been a godsend to Ryoma.

He walked up to the table of rambunctious boys and stood there with his arms crossed. "Well?" he asked. He doused the temptation to glance at the clock; it seemed that midnight was long in coming.

Each boy listed some sort of sandwich or salad, the Heart Attack Heat being one of them, and finally got to the last order. He stood there for a second, waiting for the last boy, a boy with short spiky black hair and glinting glasses. Ryoma couldn't see his eyes at all.

"How are you taking our orders?" the boy asked. Ryoma raised an eyebrow. It had come up before, the fact that he never wrote anything down, but no one had ever been so blunt. His age had also come up before. But once again, no group had ever been so *blunt*.

"Does it matter? What do you want?" Usually he'd answer politely, but these boys were getting on his nerves. No one was allowed to be that casually blunt toward Echizen Ryoma.

"A Caesar salad will be fine," the boy settled, apparently satisfied to some extent.

Ryoma turned quickly and dragged himself into the kitchen. "Two salads with vinaigrette, one of those without croutons, one Caesar salad, one Heart Attack Heat with wasabi on the side sans pickles, three hamburgers, two of those without pickles and the one with pickles should have extra tomato, and one BLT with extra B," he called out as he entered the kitchen.

A man in an apron that was white long ago snatched a spatula from the sink and headed to the grills. "Echizen, you're gonna hafta put the salads together, 'cause Minato had ta leave early. Well, get on it! And write down the burger order, cantcha? We ain't all geniuses."

Ryoma quickly scribbled down the orders of burgers that needed cooking plus one extra that he hoped his boss wouldn't notice and started throwing lettuce into bowls. He knew the lack of effort that went into the food he had a part in making, and snorted when he realized that even if Japan were a country that approved of tipping, he'd never earn a cent directly from the customers.

His service was bad-but he knew he could improve if there was a tip in his future-and the food wasn't much better. He had the salads thrown together well enough that they looked edible, but the burgers weren't near ready. Silently, Ryoma took the patties and put them into buns as his boss was cooking them. Soon enough, all the food was ready, buns in baskets and salads in bowls. With expertise, for

he had been doing this job since the end of July, he had a salad bowl in his right hand and three baskets balanced on the same arm.

Ryoma had the skill of working without talking, and so as soon as he had the four dishes on the table, he went back to the kitchen and had the next four.

"You're so fast, thank you!" the sensible, kind-looking boy said. Ryoma wasn't quite sure how to react to one of the boys when he wasn't being brash, so he just nodded and left.

"Echizen, clean up da bathroom. Some old guy tried the Heart Attack Heat and left somethin' nice for you on'a bathroom floor," his boss snickered. Ryoma ignored the teasing, uncaring of whether it was well-intentioned or not.

He was tired. So very tired.

"I gotcha bill right 'ere," a greasy overweight man drawled, surprising them all.

"What happened to our waiter?" Momoshiro asked, looking around the disturbing man and toward the darkened kitchen. The rest of the diner was empty.

"Doncha realize it's closing time? I sent 'im home a while ago since you all was takin' so long."

"Dear," Oishi muttered, looking at his watch. It wasn't quite midnight, though. "Was he okay? He seemed tired." The rest of the Seigaku boys weren't sure if that wasn't just his usual state of being.

The man stiffened the slightest bit but quickly relaxed, laying the bill on the table, controlled and deliberate. "I don't know nothing 'bout 'im, so just pay and have a nice night."

He left and started to turn off the rest of the lights, leaving only the one above them on.

"Well, *that* wasn't suspicious at all," Oishi muttered, looking sideways at the man's departing figure.

"Don't look too much into it," ordered Tezuka. He had become accustomed to giving orders, not because he was the bossy type, but because people wanted to do what he asked. He wasn't himself sure why.

The tennis players all shrugged and paid the bill, not bothering to collect their change. Quickly, Tezuka and Oishi shepherded them all out and toward the last trains that were running.

"Oi! Your change!" the fat man shouted after they had gone a ways.

"We don't want it!" Kikumarū shouted back with a smile. "I wonder if he'll keep the change or give it to Ochibi-chan."

"Ochibi-chan?" Kaidoh sputtered.

Kikumarū shrugged. "Well waiter-san didn't give us a name."

"We'll come back and see if he got the change. It seemed he needed it," stated Inui, "One must wonder... that is, I would say he was performing at, at most, 60% capacity."

The walk to the trains would not be as short as Tezuka hoped.

"Why?"

Tezuka wasn't sure who had asked, but knew the question was in everyone's mind. Why did he need to? or, Why was he so indifferent? even, Why is he so interesting?

"Why indeed," Inui answered. No one asked how Inui could figure out such a calculation because, after all, this was Inui. Tezuka

wondered about the boy. He had good balance, quick reflexes, and sharp eyes.

"He would be a good tennis player," Tezuka said, not intending to have it heard by all of his teammates.

But they heard and they all agreed, none having anything more to say on the matter.

"Kaa-san? Mom?" Ryoma called, foregoing the usual, 'I'm home.' He usually didn't get an answer anyway. "Mom?" he wondered, walking around their small apartment. "Mom, I brought some dinner home-Mom!"

He didn't usually come home to his mother sitting half-dazed on her futon, staring at nothing. Of course, it happened sometimes.

"Mom, get up. No, get up," he coaxed her into a standing position. This wasn't the first time he had to bring her from her stupor. "Are you okay?"

"Nanjiroh, that you?" she asked in English, her voice catching in her throat as she called for her husband. Her hand was reaching, searching, and gently alighted on his cheek. "Nanjiroh, you're so young..."

"No Kaa-san, it's me, Ryoma. Remember? Ryoma," he murmured to her softly as he led her to a chair in the kitchen. He unpacked a burger from his backpack, wondering if feeding themselves junk food every night for dinner would be a big detriment to their health. Even so, his mother could put on some weight. She'd been so skinny and fragile-looking for months.

Ryoma had taken to 'accidentally' writing off an extra burger or two be made just so he could take the extras home. His boss had become suspicious after the first few days he did such a thing, so he resorted to only one burger every few days.

"Mom, you have to eat," Ryoma told her. He didn't know where this gentleness came from, because he was only ever gentle with Karupin. Who was currently meowing at him, for food most likely.

He pulled her bowl out and went searching for cat food. He looked everywhere, finding nothing. "Sorry, didn't have money for groceries this week. Here, Karupin," Ryoma said, tearing a portion of the greasy meat patty off and dropping it into Karupin's bowl. What else? Oh, he needed to do the laundry. But really, that could be done on the weekend when he had more time.

"Mom?" he turned back to his mother, hoping she had a hold of herself by now.

"Ryoma?" she answered. Ryoma breathed a great sigh of relief.

He joined her at the table, sitting across from the half-dazed woman. "Yeah, it's me. Why don't you eat and I'll help you with the stuffed animals later?"

"Oh Ryoma, you're such a good boy. Have you eaten?" she asked, taking out the pickles and onions from the greasy burger.

Ryoma took whatever was rejected from her burger and munched on it. "Yeah," he lied easily, "I went out with a friend." He had no qualms about lying anymore. It made his mother feel better, and it wasn't like she'd ever figure it out. She ate in silence, a slow affair, but Ryoma didn't want to rush her. Before she was finished, he left and hauled the huge plastic bag of stuffed animals to the kitchen table. The sowing kit was much easier to move there.

Ever since his mother lost her job in the states, she hadn't been able to find a stable, well-paid one. She had tried all sorts of office jobs, those that weren't nearly as prestigious as her job as a lawyer back in LA, but could never hold them. Ryoma wondered if the move to Japan was worth it.

"How was school today?" she asked him, pausing in her dinner.

"School doesn't start again until September," he reminded her. She just looked up at him, staring blankly.

"Is that so?" she asked noncommittally.

"But I still hang out with my friends, playing tennis, stuff like that-oh, and we're doing our summer homework together. It's fun," he lied again. Lying was becoming far too easy for him.

She didn't quite grin, but it was close enough. Ryoma didn't get to see her smile enough. "Watching you play tennis, it's almost like watching Nanjiroh... So you like Rikkai Dai? Even though you've had to skip a year?"

He didn't mind that he was in a grade above what he should have been. Classes weren't that much harder. Rikkai Dai, which was the best school for tennis in all of Japan and maybe even the world, was a three-year school like all schools in Japan. If he enrolled in a school at his real grade, he would be there for one year and have to worry about entrance exams and tests for the entirety of that year and worry about gaining entrance to the Rikkai. At least this way, he could just forward the tests and scores from his American school, which were impressive records in and of themselves, and Rikkai Dai decided his admission upon those-and upon his junior tennis titles. Those were very helpful in the admission process.

He nodded in response to his mother's questions and went back to the stuffed animals. He pulled one out-in this case, all of them were the same: pink elephants. Pink, eyeless elephants. Ryoma started working before his mother was finished eating; he wasn't sure when the elephants needed to be finished.

He had sewn two eyes onto an elephant and decided that having eyes didn't improve the elephant at all. If anything, it made the stuffed animal look creepier. He wondered what poor soul in America would pick up such a hideous thing and find it cute. He imagined a teenage boy running to school, dropping by a dollar store to find a

last-minute birthday gift for his girlfriend, and picking up a pink elephant with a tag on its bottom saying, ' *Made in Japan.*'

Ryoma glared at his handiwork, annoyed that his thoughts led him to sew crookedly. He wavered between cutting the thread and redoing it or leaving it as it was.

And his thoughts continued to roam. From some sort of company 'Secret Santa', in which people regift useless junk that they never wanted, a woman would receive a nearly immaculate pink elephant with one eye askew.

He moved on to the next elephant without fixing the last one, figuring that in this case, quantity was better than quality.

And the mother who received such a useless gift from the Christmas exchange would bring the thing home and present it to her young son.

After all, the crooked eye made the elephant different from the rest; it was special.

And her son, a spoiled brat, would play with it until it bored him and then throw the elephant in a dusty room, filled with all other sorts of stuffed animals that were *Made in China*, or *Made in Indonesia*, or *Made in South Korea*...

No, Ryoma shook his head. He didn't like that scenario at all. He moved on to the next elephant, having already done three that were as perfect as pink elephants could be.

And the boy would grow up, perhaps into a responsible young adult. He'd donate all of his old toys to some kind of charity.

Ryoma emptied the plastic bag and threw the finished ones in there, since the finished were starting to outnumber the unfinished.

And the charity would wrap all sorts of toys and give them out for Christmas, to children whom Santa never visited. To a child who had never before held a toy in her hands. She would cherish the toy and maybe name it. Heffalump, after the elephant in her old, used books. After all, this elephant was in good condition, and deserved a good name. She would play with it until she handed it over to a younger sibling would love it just as much as she had, or until the thread holding its eyes withered with old age.

"Nanjiroh?"

He was swiftly carried away from his fantasy and snapped his eyes toward his mother in concern. "No, he's not here, Kaa-san."

"Ryoma."

"Yes, I'm here."

"... I'm sorry."

"I know." Ryoma knew the conversation ended there. She apologized too much, he thought. It wasn't her fault that she sorely missed her husband. He missed his dad too, though his connection with the old man was never as strong as his parents' with each other was.

Silently, his mother picked up a pink elephant and joined Ryoma in sewing the eyes. The job didn't earn a lot of income, not nearly enough to pay for the apartment, food, and tuition to his school, but it was the most they could do at the moment. And at least they weren't going it alone.

Ryoma was a fighter. And he knew his mother was a fighter too. Although everything seemed tough at the moment, and the world was out to get him, Ryoma would persevere. After all, he was getting better at endurance matches.

Most days, people ignored Echizen Ryoma. He was quiet; brilliant but quiet. He was good at tennis; incredibly good at tennis. He drew the female population to himself, but not purposefully. When asked, the girls all agreed that he had "soulful eyes, such intense eyes, the eyes of someone who's going places." But he ignored mostly everyone.

So in the tennis club, people ignored him. Mostly.

"Echizen, trying out for the regulars?" one member sneered. Frankly, Ryoma knew he had a better chance of getting into the regulars than the guy who was taunting him. So he just breezed by the loudmouth, all the while testing the strings on his racket.

The ranking matches were today, and the seniors who participated in the National championships more than a week ago would no longer be a problem. The September rankings were really just a formality, Ryoma thought. After all, there weren't any real tournaments or games at least until the District Preliminary Tournament in April, and there was another ranking match right before that. Unless he counted the Newcomer Tournament, but Ryoma still wasn't sure if he counted that. There was a tournament, not a team tournament, that was held in the spring that he was thinking of, but it was too far in the future to dwell upon now.

"We've worked out the schedules for the ranking tournaments. If you are a freshman who had wished not to participate, you may stay and watch the ranking matches or you may go home," Nishiki-buchou announced.

From what Ryoma saw, Nishiki was not the strongest player in the tennis team. Ryoma had joined this grade with all the other freshmen, noting that of all the players, Yukimura was the best. The very best. Followed closely by Sanada and Yanagi.

"Echizen Ryoma, you're up!"

Some were surprised, especially the second-year who had teased Ryoma mere minutes before. They probably hadn't thought he would participate. He'd arrived in Japan toward the end of tennis season anyway, and so appeared to be a freshman from nowhere. But Ryoma glanced at the Three Demons, knowing that they expected a lot from him. Ryoma was ambitious, but not stupid. He wasn't nearly as arrogant here as he was back in the states; back there, he knew he was the best. Here, he wasn't sure. Here, this was the country in which Oyaji learned his life lessons to pass on to his son. And if Ryoma had learned anything from the man, it was that he still had a lot more to work on.

So, with the knowledge that at any point he could be up against one of the Three Demons, he walked onto the court.

Fifteen minutes later, he walked off, disappointed at the lack of skill in his opponent. After looking at the set up, he realized that none of the regulars were in his bracket. In fact, he would guess that he was paired with the most pathetic players on the team except for one: Kiri-hara Akaya. The seniors looked at the freshman, some in awe and some in resentment. It wasn't every day that a freshman beat a pretty strong third-year. Ryoma would object.

But now Echizen Ryoma had issued his challenge to the school and to the world. His eyes glowed in anticipation, saying, "Mada mada da ne."

Next chapter: Echizen Ryoma vs. Kiri-hara Akaya!

Echizen Ryoma vs Kiriara Akaya

Chapter Two: Echizen Ryoma vs Kiriara Akaya

"The match of the century!"

"Can you believe they're both freshmen?"

"And against Kiriara! Kiriara's going to destroy him."

The murmurings and astonished mutterings all sounded the same:
"Echizen against Kiriara will be the match to watch."

The other blocks were already decided, with the addition of Marui Bunta and Niou Masaharu to the regular team, joining those second year students who were already regulars.

"I'll get him in two minutes," Kiriara boasted. Ryoma could tell that the boy was confident. But so was he. They'd been in the same class for months, and Ryoma thought he knew the boy well enough. Kiriara was loud and prideful, whereas Ryoma tended to blend in until the situation called for his insight. He had the advantage of knowing Kiriara without the boy knowing him.

Stepping up to the net, Ryoma held his racket strings-down, ready to decide who would go first. "Which?" Ryoma asked.

The other boy locked eyes on him and smirked. "Rough." Ryoma let his racket drop, and with a final clatter...

"Rough," Ryoma announced. This would be the beginning of a hard match, he knew, but he was determined to enjoy it.

"I got it right," Kiriara suddenly piped up, "but I'll let you choose."

What was Kiriara playing at? Ryoma looked up at the boy, because he was at least five inches taller than himself, and tried searching his

face for any clue as to what he was planning. Well, Ryoma wasn't a chivalrous person. "Then I'll serve," he answered simply. Let Kirihara be the nice guy. On the court and in the game, you couldn't take an opponent so lightly. If he hadn't been laying low since he got there, he would have been offended at Kirihara's arrogance. As it was, he'd enjoy proving the boy wrong.

He took his position behind the baseline and moved his feet around. He wondered if he needed to take off his ankle weights for this match since he had worn them for all his other matches. He glanced up at his opponent and smirked. He needed to make it an even match after all.

Without hesitating, Ryoma let his twist serve fly. He thought Kirihara was being a little over-dramatic as the other boy dropped his racket and almost fell on his backside. "Mada mada da ne."

Kirihara stood slowly, picking up his racket. "I'm going to destroy you," he announced, as if it were a set event. As if there were no doubt. At least the other boy finally looked serious, Ryoma thought.

Ryoma's next serve was returned easily enough, as if Kirihara had finally stopped underestimating him. But when Kirihara lobbed it over, Ryoma wasn't sure what the other boy was thinking. In the instant that he saw the ball flying high overhead, he heard people muttering that it was a good move, that Echizen was too short to reach such a high ball.

But Ryoma was good, and Kirihara wasn't stupid. So as he smashed the ball over to the other side, Ryoma wondered why Kirihara tried to lob the ball at all. Ryoma was short but powerful. He got his answer as Kirihara used a single-footed split step to hit the ball back over the net. Ryoma was shocked but didn't let it show. He'd been planning to unveil his split step as a new move in his own repertoire, but apparently this guy already had it down.

When Kirihara lobbed it *again*, Ryoma decided he had no idea what his opponent was thinking. The first time could have been just to test

him, but the second? What reason could Kirihara have to lob the ball a second time?

Instead of responding as his opponent would expect, Ryoma twisted around midair and with great precision, brushed the back of the ball with the strings of his racket in a surprising drop shot. He watched the ball hit Kirihara's side, narrowly dodge the desperate reach of the boy's racket, and soar back to him, sailing straight for his face. At the last minute, Ryoma smirked and leaned to the left, letting the tennis ball soar straight past him-"It's going to be in!" "Why'd he just dodge it?"-and right past the baseline.

"Deuce!"

They were even.

"Echizen Ryoma, why don't you take off those ankle weights?"

Ryoma smirked and answered in turn, "What about you? Aren't you going to take off your wrist weights?" They both unstrapped their weights and threw them to the side of the court with twin thuds.

Now, they were even. Now, they could actually play and enjoy it too.

Ryoma served again, but it seemed that as soon as the ball left his racket, it was bouncing right past him. Thankful for his own quick step, he tried to hit it back-but to no avail. The ball hit the net soundly and now Kirihara was ahead.

Ryoma heard the bells of the school toll. It had been more than two minutes. Their game wasn't even close to ending.

The game was so intense, so full of energy, that Ryoma was on the defensive most of the time. However, he was holding his own against the Devil Kirihara about whom people had warned him.

But then something changed. As Ryoma saw the ball he just hit heading straight toward Kirihara, he could swear he saw the boy's

eyes become bloodshot. And he saw the ball, like a bullet, coming back and heading straight for his knee. He tried to take a step away, but he felt a sharp stinging sensation bringing him down.

"Heh, you didn't let the ball hit the most important part of your knee," Kiri-hara sneered with new hostility, "but a little speed won't save you." It was a point to Kiri-hara.

Kiri-hara grasped the tennis ball with his knuckles, and Ryoma prepared himself for whatever Kiri-hara would throw at him next.

At the serve, the ball spun crazily, erratically, from his hand, and as the racket came crashing toward it, Ryoma wondered how anyone could predict the path of the little felt ball. Kiri-hara must have been able to, Ryoma thought, because from the pain in his knee, he realized that Kiri-hara had aimed for the same spot.

"I'm gonna speed it up even more," Kiri-hara warned, as if he was enjoying Ryoma's pain.

Ryoma didn't let his uncertainty cloud his judgment or his expression. He was going to win. Of his victory, he was certain.

Three more hit the same spot on his knee, and Ryoma's certainty was dying. The fourth time Kiri-hara aimed for his knee, Ryoma lowered his racket, having established that Kiri-hara didn't care about letting a pattern show. Most tennis players didn't allow their opponents to find patterns in their plays unless they were sure that knowing the patterns wouldn't make a difference.

But Ryoma was wrong. The ball bounced from the court and toward his face in a completely unexpected change. And in a desperate move, he shifted his racket to shield his face and accidentally hit the ball much too high.

He knew it wouldn't end happily when he saw Kiri-hara preparing for a smash. And this time, Ryoma didn't know which part of his body to protect. Kiri-hara had a perfect opening, and Ryoma was much too

vulnerable for his own tastes. The ball slammed into the same knee, the same knee! Ryoma gritted his teeth, only letting the smallest of strained sounds escape him.

It was 2-0.

Ryoma wasn't sure if he even wanted to win anymore. He had his hands on his knee and his eyes pointed downward.

No. He couldn't give up. Tennis was the last thing he had going for him, and even if everything else in his world sucked, he would never give up a game.

He stood up and bounced his tennis ball to get ready for his serve. He was not giving up. Never. With his teeth clenched, he hit his twist serve, knowing it alone was not enough to beat the red-eyed demon. But the set went to Kirihara anyway, all the while knocking Ryoma's knee.

And the next set looked ready for Kirihara to win. But Ryoma couldn't let him. No, no way. As Kirihara readied what looked to be a powerful smash, Ryoma knew that he couldn't lose. If not for himself, then for his mother. How happy would she be to hear that her son, a freshman who shouldn't have even been a freshman, made it onto the regular team of the no. 1 ranked school in the country? Yes, for Kaa-san. And for Oyaji.

He wasn't sure if it was just his newfound determination or if there really was a gust of wind, but somehow, Ryoma felt all his tiredness swept away and energy filling him. He was ready, and he would win. He knew it wasn't just the competitive spirit. It was something else, something almost divine coursing through his veins.

He slid on his heels, hitting Kirihara's smash back to him. Another point for Echizen.

"Nobody beats me in tennis," Ryoma said in English. He only taunted his opponents in English when he was in a particularly good

mood. And from Kirihara's face, he could tell the other boy's English was lacking. Not that it wasn't already obvious from the boy's inability in their English class.

"Nobody," Ryoma almost snarled, again in English. He switched to his left hand, knowing that he'd have to give this match his all. He hadn't expected to face such a competitor on his first day, but he'd have to pull out all the stops in order to beat him. He served without pomp and circumstance, right through Kirihara's legs. Just to taunt him. Just to show him that no one could play such a vicious strategy against Echizen Ryoma and get away with it.

And just for kicks, he served the tennis ball again, straight between his legs. There was no way Kirihara could hit that ball, not without getting hit or risk missing it completely. This set was Ryoma's. He kept his play unpredictable, changing, dynamic.

And then... "Game, set, match. Echizen!"

The youngest regular in the history of Rikkaidai Fuzoku. A very tired and weary player at that.

But he brushed past all of the congratulations, all of the glares, all of everything. With his dignity intact, he walked into the clubhouse, and like a zombie, showered and changed. It was as he was walking past a bench that he felt the world tilt and he let it.

"I'm a regular!" Momoshiro crowed. He put a friendly arm around Kaidoh's neck. "And so are you!" Kaidoh hissed and hit Momoshiro over the head. He wasn't going to put up with Momoshiro's antics, not even today.

"We should celebrate, ne?" Kikumarū asked. They had been friends, of a sort, since the end of the Nationals, and it was with Kikumarū's and others' help that Momoshiro and Kaidoh made the regular team.

"Ah, our restaurant is closed this month for repairs..." Kawamura apologized without actually apologizing. No one blamed him anyway.

They all understood, but before the mood could get too heavy, Fuji made a suggestion. "Do you remember that diner? Right after the Nationals?"

He saw their faces scrunch in displeasure. Fuji never knew why his tastes were so different from his friends'. "Well," he thought of a good excuse, one that they'd latch onto, "don't you want to see if the kid got our tip?" Fuji smirked when he saw the reversal in their expressions. Most of them looked thoughtful, and Kikumarū looked excited. He himself wanted to know how the boy was doing; he was an enigma, a puzzle ready to be solved.

"Let's gooooo!" Kikumarū shouted, pulling Oishi and anyone else he could grab toward the trains. "It's not that far anyway!" It really wasn't, and if they wanted to, they could have walked to the diner. It was right on the border between the Kanagawa prefecture and Tokyo, and walking there from Seigaku would be shorter than even walking to Kawamura's sushi restaurant.

After a short and general consensus, they walked over to the diner in little time. "Ochibi, we're here!" Kikumarū called as soon as they entered. The diner already had a few occupants, all of whom looked back at the redhead.

"Where is he, I wonder?" Oishi voiced his thoughts aloud. There still weren't many workers. From what they saw, the diner could use some more help. There was one man who looked to be in his mid-twenties taking orders on a notepad. He glanced at the newcomers and seemed to sigh.

Fuji noticed that the boy they'd had last time had done the same thing when confronted with the group of eight or so teenagers.

"Go take a booth," the man called, and wrapped up his orders. They slid into the same booth they'd had last time since it was unoccupied

and since it was more likely the same waiter would recognize them.

The man who had been taking orders walked to their booth a few minutes later, notepad in hand. "I'll be your waiter, Ryo. What'll you have to drink, fellas?" he asked congenially.

"Where's the other waiter?" Fuji asked. Lately, he'd been the king of being blunt and tactless. But since this was Fuji Shusuke, no one could deny him.

"We don't have just two waiters," he laughed, "Any particular details you could give me?"

So far, this waiter seemed much better than the surly teenager they'd had last time. Kawamura was starting to rethink asking for the boy, especially if they could have this waiter instead. Kaidoh liked this waiter more too, a man who wasn't full of himself and wasn't overly friendly either.

Kikumaru strained his thought. "Well, he's short. And wears a Fila cap."

"He's quiet, has good reflexes."

"He glares a lot and took our orders by memory. Really impressive, since my dad doesn't even take his sushi orders by memory."

"He was functioning at most, 60%, and there was a 10% chance that he would pass out before we had paid our bill."

"You know the punk?"

The waiter's confused face gradually grew into a wide grin and then into a more subdued, sad smile. "Usually he's here by six on weekdays since school started this September, but today, he just hasn't shown up or called or anything. Is there a reason you want to see him? Are you from his school?"

"No, we're..." Fuji smiled to himself secretly, "friends of sorts. The last time we were here, it was after the National Tennis Tournament."

"Oh, you're on his tennis team?" the waiter interrupted excitedly. "He never talks about tennis, except that he's going to win the Nationals next year."

They all paused. That would mean that this boy actually did play tennis. Kikumaru was beyond excited, and everyone else was wired. They had seen evidence of the boy's skills, and they all wanted to see how they manifested on the tennis court.

It seemed Tezuka was the only one to glean the most important information. He gathered all the information in his mind, information that Inui wouldn't find as important. The boy went to a school either in the Tokyo or Kanagawa prefecture. He was working, even during the holiday, until or even past midnight. Inui would calculate that there were twelve somewhat talented teams in their Tokyo district and therefore about twelve teams in each of the four districts. So about forty-eight teams in the Tokyo prefecture. And a little less than that in Kanagawa. Of course, that was assuming that the boy's tennis team was good enough to really be a tennis team. One good player was never enough to propel a team to win the Nationals. Only sixteen schools in the two prefectures combined could make it into the nationals. Tezuka knew it well.

But Tezuka knew that tennis captains, like their current captain, would never let their good players work a job after school. It was impractical and bad for a player's health and grades, which was why Kawamura had to get special permission from both the school and Sugiyama-buchou. As vice captain, Tezuka knew the ins and outs of the captain's rulebook. It was obvious that the boy who had served them wasn't related to the man who owned the diner, and a kid in school wouldn't go through so much for a job that paid little. Either he was getting a lot of money, which was as likely as Fuji giving a straight answer, or the boy needed his job for the little money he could make.

"You haven't tried calling him?" Oishi asked, trying to be helpful. From anyone else, the question could have been condescending, but from Oishi, it was obvious that his worry was genuine.

"The kid doesn't have a cell phone. How about you order what you want, and when he gets in, I'll tell him you're here, and he can take over this table?"

Some of them were obviously unsatisfied, but Oishi and Tezuka both tacitly agreed that waiting would be better than pestering their waiter. So they ordered quickly and sat, waiting.

Ryoma wasn't sure how long he'd been in the clubhouse. It was dark already. Actually, it had been dark for what seemed like an eternity. Ryoma didn't have a watch, and if he'd had one, he wouldn't have been able to use it.

He'd tried the door. Several times. He had punched it, kicked it, even slammed into it with his shoulder. He remembered the hazy moments before he half-heard the lock click.

"Don't worry, I'll lock it, Nishiki-buchou," Kiri-hara's voice said in false cheeriness. There was no way Kiri-hara would be cheery after a defeat like that. He didn't seem the type who wanted to grow from defeat; he wanted to win.

"Did Echizen go home already?" That sounded like Sanada-senpai.

"Yeah," Kiri-hara answered, "He took a nap and then left before we finished cleaning up."

"What a lazy ass," another senpai clucked with disapproval.

Ryoma was tired, groggy, and realized that he should have eaten lunch. Kiri-hara stuck his head into the clubhouse. Ryoma could hear the smirk in his voice. "Night, sleeping beauty. Hope it's not too chilly tonight." Click.

It was September, when the heat of summer slowly gave way to the cool of autumn. Thankfully, it wasn't too far into September. Unfortunately, however, there was no way the clubhouse could be restful. The walls would keep in the stifling heat and the entire place was just suffocating. If the night were cool, the walls would do nothing to insulate him. Not good either way.

More than the weather, there were his worries. Ryoma could sleep through bad weather, but he couldn't sleep through his worries. What about his homework? What about that report due tomorrow afternoon? How would he answer Nishiki-buchou once the captain opened the clubhouse the next morning? Would he be fired for missing work without telling anyone? Ryoma paused. What would happen if that source of income were cut off? Would they be able to make rent? And what about his mother?

An icy chill settled into his bones even though he knew the air couldn't possibly be so cold. His mother, he thought. His mother, sitting all alone on her futon, waiting for Nanjiroh to come back to her. Would she eat while Ryoma wasn't there to urge her? Would she take care of herself at all? He thought he could finish the next batch of stuffed animals; this time, they were sharks, and the eyes were slanted and menacing. His mom would never take the initiative and sew them on herself.

His head fell into his hands, because he could do nothing else. He never realized Kirihara Akaya was such a sore loser. If he'd known this would happen, he would have thrown the match. What was winning a game against losing his mother? Ryoma was almost certain that he'd come home the next day to a body and an empty bottle of pills. She'd tried it once before. Just once.

But just once was enough to make Ryoma panic.

But he knew himself; if he'd known this would happen... he would have won the match anyway but endure the walk to the diner, give the manager an excuse, and go home to take care of his mom. Ryoma knew he could never throw a match. When he went to

heaven and saw his old man, what did he want to say about this match? That he forfeited? No, Nanjiroh would want to hear that he persevered, stuck it out, and still was able to take care of his mother.

But he couldn't sleep, no, not while something could be happening to his mother. He slammed his shoulder into the solid wood door again, but to no avail. He tried looking into the lock, to see how the tumblers fell and if he could pick it open. The darkness didn't help, and there was only so much moonlight streaming through the window-the window?

He climbed onto the bench, and used some open lockers as footholds. The windows were pretty small, but he could fit through. He figured that if the sun had set at around 6:30, he'd still have time to stop by the diner and feed his boss an excuse for missing and maybe save his job. But the windows were small, and weren't made to be opened.

He lowered himself back down and found the frame of a racket. As he felt the weight of the thing in his hands, he wondered if damaging school property was grounds for expulsion. It wasn't as if they'd catch him, though. There weren't any guards around, and Ryoma would be too quick for the janitors. Probably.

His worry for his mom far outweighed the consequences of breaking a window. He realized he'd have to be quick in case someone heard the glass break. So with all his strength, he swung the tennis racket straight through the glass, and continued swinging it to get as much of the sharp points off of the window frame. Even so, as he slid through the window, he felt the remaining glass cut through his shirt and his shorts, and he could feel small stings where the glass tore through his skin. Blood. Bright red blood. But he couldn't delay. He heard some men shouting and took that as his cue to start running.

He was running and running and running, for an eternity, and would have kept running if he hadn't seen the gaggle of tennis players who had eaten at the diner less than a month ago. They were actually *leaving* the diner. What were they doing there?

"I hope Ochibi is okay," the redhead said. Ryoma wondered what idiot would name his kid Ochibi. Such an embarrassing name. He felt sorry for whomever had to be referred to as such.

"Maybe he was just having an off day and couldn't go to work or contact the diner?" a black-haired boy, the most normal of the bunch, commiserated. So they knew someone who worked at the diner? Then Ochibi was probably a nickname. Maybe that's why they had come in the first time.

Another boy shook his head, a boy with glasses and spiky hair. "100% chance that he would have called if he could. Kikumaru has reason to worry."

"Oh no, poor Ochibi! Oishi, we should go in and wait for him some more!"

The blunt brown-haired one laid a hand on the hyper one's shoulder. "Maa maa, it's past midnight. If he hasn't come by now, I doubt he'll come anytime soon."

Ryoma was tired of hearing such depressing conversation, and so moved on into the kitchen of the diner.

"Yo Echizen, what happened to you?" one of his senpai asked in bewilderment. Ryoma hadn't yet thought of a good excuse, nor had he even looked at himself. He took a moment to do so, lifting up a half-washed pan to see his reflection. He winced. The cuts on his cheeks didn't look good, and he could see the cuts on his hands too. The blood was frightening, though it didn't seem like much.

"It was an accident. I just want to say that I'm very sorry for not being able to make it here on time, and I hope that I still have a job," Ryoma said stoically from his bowing position. He knew that now was not the time for his oft-misplaced pride. And he needed to get home as soon as possible.

"Echizen!" his boss called in irritation. "Whoa, Echizen?" the man amended.

Ryoma straightened and looked at his manager. He didn't need to say anything. Or he didn't know how to say anything.

"Go home, Echizen, get you some sleep, and come back tomorra' at seven PM 'stead a six," the man said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Ryoma knew he should be thankful that he at least had a job, but taking away an hour would take away from his pay! "But I can still make it at six everyday-"

"But you won't, ya hear me? Dun worry, Echizen, maybe you'll get a raise for bein' so darn persistent. Your pay per day'll hardly change. Now get!" Ryoma couldn't hide his grin at his good fortune. He never thought he'd meet such an understanding boss in his lifetime.

As he was walking out the door, the other waiter, Ryo, called to him. "Oi, Echizen, some eight or so teenagers from your tennis club were looking for you."

People from the Rikkaidai tennis team? Did they know he worked there? Before he let the panic seize him, he asked, "What did they look like?"

"Oh, there were a colorful bunch. There were two really hyper ones, a redhead and another guy. The one in the corner kept hissing at me, the guy with the glasses was studying me, and they were just a really strange group."

Ryoma couldn't remember a single person who fit those descriptions from Rikkai, but kept it in his mind anyway. A hyper redhead... a hissing boy... and a boy with glasses... wait. "Was there also three brunettes, one who always smiled with his eyes close, another meek one, and a third who didn't say much of anything?"

"Oh, so you do know them! I was starting to think they were stalking you or something," the other man laughed. Ryoma laughed with him, hiding his growing worry from his senpai. It seemed that tonight would be his night for worrying.

He had reason to be concerned about a bunch of teens stalking him, especially if they were from an enemy school. What would Nishikibuchou say? Or the Three Demons? No one on the Rikkai team would tolerate such an association.

But he pushed those half-formed concerns to the back of his mind since there was something more important.

He more slammed than opened the apartment door once he got to the government subsidized apartment complex, not even bothering to kick his ratty shoes off, and like a hurricane, swept around looking for Echizen Rinko. He didn't see her in the bathroom, or in the rooms or on her futon, and his imagination was conjuring all sorts of horrible scenes..."Kaa-san, where are you?" he called desperately. Where was she?

"Here, Ryoma, why are you shouting?" she was in the kitchen in front of the stove, wearing an apron that Ryoma didn't even know made it to Japan. Her hair was collected into a neat bun and her eyes had lost their gray haze. They were positively shining. "I've made dinner. Now I know you like Japanese food-

"You're okay," he muttered as he stared at her. He squashed his temptation to hug her to see if she was really there. He wasn't a child and didn't need such petty reassurances.

"Oh, the laundry's done and Karupin went right to sleep after dinner-

"You're okay," he repeated himself. Sometimes he needed some reassurance.

"Of course I am, silly! she said, lightly patting Ryoma on the shoulder. He winced as the brief touch brushed a gash under his

shirt. "Oh, but you are not, mister!" She bustled around the kitchen and found the first aid kit easily enough. She was in her right mind.

She used alcohol to clean the visible cuts, even the sensitive ones on his cheek. He flinched away from her fingers but calmed when he caught a glance of her smooth hands. "What happened? Was it during tennis?"

It was somewhat of a daft question, and Ryoma briefly wondered if she was starting one of her episodes, but he looked at her face and only saw concern. No, she had a hold of herself. After all, she didn't play tennis and over the years she'd seen much stranger injuries. He couldn't blame her for thinking it was tennis, and it gave him a convenient out. "Uh, yeah, I was playing this guy named Kirihara. Oh, and I made the regular team." Finally, good news he could give his mother.

She smiled broadly at him and clapped her hands in excitement. "How wonderful! Oh, Nanjiroh would be so proud of you!" she said, ruffling his hair. Ryoma knew he would. She hugged him again. "I'll tell him your success as soon as he gets home!"

Ryoma's face fell.

"Oh, do you want to tell him?" she asked, seeing his expression.

"Mom," he sighed, "Dad's dead."

She looked at him strangely and gave a carefree laugh. "Don't be ridiculous, Ryoma. Your father will be home any time now." She continued to dab alcohol on the cuts on his face.

"No Kaa-san," he said, putting a hand on hers and lowering them at the same time. "Look around. It's almost one in the morning. Why are we in this apartment? Why are you in this kitchen? Why are we speaking Japanese?"

"I-well, we had been planning to move to Japan for the new school year..." her voice held uncertainty, and her smile faded. Her hands reached into her hair, nails tearing into her scalp, and she tried to keep a sane hold of herself with the physical sensation of pain. Ryoma knew that not much needed to be said. She'd usually break down at this point, and he'd hold her up as her last pillar of support.

"He's gone, isn't he?" she whispered. Ryoma nodded into her hair, now in disarray, as he held the shaking woman close to him. This kind of embrace was okay, he thought. He wasn't a child. He was the adult.

"Why can't I join him?" she cried, squeezing Ryoma and letting her tears soak his shirt. These were the kind of words that Ryoma feared. He feared that one day, he would come home after she had said these words to herself and done the deed. He feared that she would leave him by himself, leave him, just like his old man had. He feared that he'd have to go on living this half-life alone.

Ryoma had thought of it before, of what would happen if his mother really did succeed one day. What would he have? He couldn't continue to go to Rikkai. He probably wouldn't be able to play tennis. And tennis was all he had left of his father. If life became so unbearable that even Ryoma wasn't enough to keep her on this earth, then Ryoma figured he'd join her. No one would miss him. It was just him and his mother. And without her, he didn't know what he'd do.

So when he clutched her and buried his face in her hair, he found he didn't mind feeling like a child. If feeling like a child meant he could depend on his parents without worrying, then he wouldn't mind at all. But to Ryoma, that feeling was just a cold memory.

Next chapter: Echizen Ryoma vs. Rikkaidai Class 1-A

Notes: I really don't want to be the begging type of author, but the fact remains that reviews remind me that there are people who

actually liked the story. **And also that many readers will be more likely to read a story with a lot of reviews** . It's unfortunate, but that's usually the way it is. So spread the love and leave a review!

Echizen Ryoma vs Rikkaidai Class 1A

Chapter Three: Echizen Ryoma vs Rikkaidai Class 1A

"Now, this is the last time we're asking. Do any of you know who broke the window of the clubhouse two days ago?" Nishiki-buchou demanded. It really wasn't a big deal. Windows were broken often enough; after all, it was the *tennis* clubhouse. However, the glass shards were scattered outside, meaning that the window had been broken from the inside. What really seemed to make the senpai mad was that no one was confessing when it obviously wasn't an accident.

Who would? Admitting to purposefully destroying school property was grounds for expulsion, and Ryoma was not risking that.

Ryoma stood stoically in the back, not saying a word. He assumed Kirihara knew who the culprit was. But if Kirihara accused Ryoma, he'd need a reason for his certainty. And surely Kirihara would end up in more trouble than Ryoma once everything was out in the open.

Nishiki-buchou sighed. "Everybody, twenty laps. Echizen, stay behind for a second." Ryoma didn't feel that nervous. If they accused him, they had no proof, especially since Kirihara had lied and said he saw Ryoma leave practice early that day. Confidently, he approached the captain.

"It's about your regular jersey," Nishiki-buchou started, rubbing the back of his head in mock embarrassment. "We thought about it, my vice captain and even the principal. We thought it best to wait until the next ranking tournaments to order your jacket. It's not you, personally, Echizen, but you *are* a freshman-

"Kiri *hara* 's a freshman," Ryoma interrupted. He didn't usually get mad. But then again, he had never really faced any sort of discrimination. And he could tell that it was quite personal.

Nishiki-buchou started to look frustrated. "Listen, Echizen, if you want, you can pay for your jacket yourself. You're allowed to. Actually, all of *us* have. But if you want the school to pay for it, you're going to have to *really* earn it." So that's what it was. Money, pride? They didn't think he earned his place?

"Niou-senpai and Marui-senpai-

"Have both ordered and paid for their jerseys. And they're juniors. They've worked hard for their spots."

"And I haven't?" Ryoma asked calmly, without anger, without indignation. It was a simple question. He wanted an equally simple answer.

"No. Prove yourself in the next ranking match, or pay for your own jacket," Nishiki-buchou said with finality.

"... what about the Newcomer Tournament?" Ryoma had considered that tournament before, but he would need some help from his senpai to get in. To enter, he needed the recommendation of his captain. It would prove his worth, right? If he could beat everyone else?

Nishiki-buchou didn't answer immediately. He let out a short, almost exasperated breath. "We're sending Kiri-hara Akaya. We've seen his ability since middle school. I'm sorry, Echizen."

Ryoma hardly thought he was sorry, but he nodded in understanding anyway because it was expected of him. "Now go and do your twenty," Nishiki-buchou added like a last minute thought. Without a word, Ryoma started running his laps. But it still wasn't fair. He had worked hard, fought tooth and nail for that regular spot. It still seemed no one believed he had won. The regulars still included Kiri-hara in everything they did and looked at Ryoma like he was nothing.

It wasn't fair! He put on a burst of speed, lapping everyone else twice. But when was life ever fair? He'd been running with no real prize in sight. The Nationals seemed so far away, like an old fairy-tale told to him ages ago, something that belonged to those before him, but not to him. Soon, he thought, he'd be run dry.

He maintained a steady pace behind some fellow first years, but they were lagging. Soon, he had passed them, and a few minutes later lapped them *and* the third years who were jogging in front of them. Dammit, he was better than these seniors! His legs pushed him forward, lapping four more times without ever losing speed. Ryoma could go all day.

Eventually, he found himself on his last lap right behind a group of juniors and one freshman: the regulars plus one. Ryoma didn't think it was anger that pushed him to speed up. Nor was it for attention. As he passed all of them up, he thought it was to prove to himself that he was good enough.

But to everyone else, he was "such a show-off," and "an arrogant little prick."

"Showing your skills early can only hinder you unless you have some very good comrades," a soft yet strong voice kindly said to him in passing. It seemed like the only pleasant words anyone at Rikkaidai had ever spoken.

He looked up into the eyes of one of the Three Demons. The most fearsome of them all, Yukimura Seiichi. He wasn't sure how to respond so he didn't try to. Thankfully, the junior seemed to understand and just smiled and left.

Maybe Rikkai wouldn't be so bad.

Well, it had been a nice thought at the time.

The first sign of the bullying had been subtle. No one lent him books and no one spoke to him. Of course, Ryoma hadn't noticed at the time because he never forgot his books and he didn't speak to anyone anyway. They whispered about him, but Ryoma was used to whispers. Back in America, the whispers never really existed, because his school wasn't too concerned about tennis, but he always had to ignore whispers at tournaments and tennis clubs. Here, it seemed, everyone knew of the freshman regular who wasn't really considered a regular. The kid who was even too cheap to pay for his own regular jersey.

They whispered, but he never knew the content of their whispers until well into October. Tennis season was pretty much over, and the regulars trained. The other members weren't obligated to practice, but a few joined them during the colder months anyway.

There had always been the glares and the cold sneers directed toward him, but it seemed his peers were finally bored with the non-action.

It was the first class on a Monday that the beginning of his hardships really solidified. He sat down in his seat, hyper aware of everyone's gaze on him. He wondered what was so interesting. After a while, he cautiously tried to turn in his seat and felt a great resistance. His eyes widened. No way.

He tried to push himself from the desk with his hand, but as soon as his he touched the sticky desktop, he knew it was pointless. He pulled his hand off the desk before the glue could dry; he didn't fancy ripping his skin. He assumed that it was the same glue holding him fast to his seat.

"Why don't you try to get up, Echizen?" a hatefully familiar voice asked. *Kirihara* .

Ryoma ignored him and laid out sheets of paper on his gluey desk. It really wasn't his problem if the papers would be stuck there for all of

eternity. At least now he could open his books on his table without worrying about them sticking.

Snickers. The tittering and sneers of his peers were like a cacophony of concerted malice, with Kirihara's grating laugh being the loudest.

Were all of them in on the prank? Although it was harmless, to his life at the very least, it was a huge hindrance. Thankfully, the teachers were the ones who moved from class to class instead of the students. Ryoma supposed there must have been at least one good thing about the Japanese education system. So he remained in his seat. There was no way he'd give his tormentors the satisfaction of watching him struggle to remove himself.

But finally it came time for physical education, and the students had to file outside. Everyone laughed openly at Ryoma, still sitting in his desk, apparently oblivious.

"Echizen," a teacher called.

"I'll be there," Ryoma responded. He wasn't sure how, though. Only once everyone was outside did he even try to stand up. And the chair went with him, toppling him completely. He was bent forward, completely amiss at how to rectify his situation.

He righted the chair, with his bottom still stuck in the seat. He supposed it would have been humorous were he watching someone else in his position. He remembered a time in middle school, when he wasn't the outsider. Of course, he wasn't *in*, either. There was a girl, if he remembered correctly, who had apparently stolen another girl's boyfriend. The other girls couldn't have possibly seen her as a threat. She was mild-mannered, sweet, timid, not the stealing type; no, there was no reason to bully her. But it had happened anyway. It seemed the girls in his class always had to have a target. And he remembered an exact scenario in which she was glued to her seat. She tore her skirt in trying to get out. And transferred to another school within the month. Maybe this was karma since he had done nothing to help her.

But, Ryoma thought, he wasn't so weak. No one was here, so he didn't have to embarrass himself. He unbuttoned his pants and lithely slipped out of them. It was the strangest sensation, wearing his underwear in the classroom like this. Quickly, he locked the door to the classroom and shut off the lights. No way was he going to let anyone see him like this. He had forty or so minutes left to either find another pair of pants without leaving the room or unstick his pants from the chair.

Well, he'd have to start looking for pants here, or he'd have to find acetone, super glue's enemy. Which was just as likely. If only he had his tennis bag in the classroom, at least he'd have a pair of shorts to wear.

He started from the back of the room, checking cabinets and in other people's desks. The desks only had their books and the occasional love note. Of course, he did find the tube of superglue and a note that might as well have been a confession in the culprit's desk. The first closet had textbooks and textbooks and calculators. The second had a girl's uniform, of all the luck. Well, if he couldn't find anything else, he still wouldn't be caught dead in a skirt. The third had all sorts of things, and Ryoma wasn't sure if he wanted to rifle through all of it to find a pair of pants. He stuck his head in to see what was there anyway. Chalk, chalkboard eraser, chalk, dry erase markers, cleaning solutions for the school, nail polish remover, cotton balls, Q-tips, toothbrush, more cleaning solution, chalk, text books, and nothing else really.

He moved on to the fourth cabinet and growled at its emptiness. Really, nothing? All he needed was a pair of pants! Or acetone, he corrected himself, but acetone would be nigh impossible to find-

Ryoma rushed back to the third cabinet. Nail polish remover! Yes! He didn't care how much he'd have to use to get his pants unstuck, but he would do it before everyone came back from physical education.

It was a long, painstaking process. It was, dab a little nail polish remover, brush with the toothbrush, and hope some of the glue came

off. It was a long process. But his pants were about ready to come off of the chair, so he kept going.

Rrrrring! Was that the bell? Already? He knew he had, at most, four minutes before the students came back from the gym. But they would be running to see what had become of Ryoma...

There was only a bit left of the glue... just a bit, and he could swear he heard loud footsteps getting closer and closer to the classroom door. C'mon, almost finished-

Echizen got on his nerves. Not only was he a nerd, but he was a cocky bastard too. How *dare* he? How *dare* he!

Akaya was the demon, the Freshman prodigy, Devil Kiri-hara! With the bloodshot eyes and the frightening step. How *dare* that brat try to usurp his place? Echizen was even younger than he was! Echizen should have still been in middle school!

He knew there was resentment in their class, class A. Nobody liked that a mere kid was doing better than everyone else. Getting straight A's, shooting to the top of the class when he hadn't even gone to ninth grade! What was this bullshit?

And the Three Demons... Kiri-hara saw the boy speaking to Yukimura-buchou. And had Yukimura been putting on his affected kindness? No. It seemed, from where Kiri-hara had been lurking, that Buchou had been genuinely nice and supportive toward him, hadn't he? What had happened when *he* tried to show his ambition? He had been crushed! But no, Yukimura-buchou had to make little Echizen feel better.

Ridiculous.

Nothing seemed fair anymore. So to even up the playing field, so to speak, he asked for some help in the student body. It wasn't hard by any means. Nobody *liked* Echizen because he never lowered himself

to speak to anyone, and there were a lot of people who really disliked him for no valid reasons at all.

All he had to do was encourage the enmity toward Echizen and spread his tale of woe, how he himself had been a spectacular regular that year, beating both the captain of Seigaku and the captain of Makinofuji. How he had worked hard, ever since his first year in Rikkaidai Middle School, and then had it all taken away by one bad game against the arrogant, emotionless Echizen. What right did he have to represent Rikkai? He obviously didn't even like the school.

And people rallied to his cause. Echizen didn't notice a thing because, frankly, he was Echizen.

He wasn't even behind everything. He overheard Nishiki-buchou telling Echizen about not getting the regular jersey, and that just warmed Akaya's cold dead heart. Wasn't it ironic that Kirihara Akaya had a regular jersey and Echizen didn't? Wasn't it just poetic?

And the desk! Whoo, the desk! Akaya wondered who had the balls to try such a risky move. After all, that would be solid proof that Echizen was being bullied, and he could snitch to a teacher. But it seemed Echizen was too proud and sat glued to his chair, even through lunch and apparently he would continue to sit there through P.E.

As soon as they left earshot of the teachers, the students outside all tittered about the latest prank. "That was genius!" one boy crowed.

"Wasn't it?" a girl said, twisting a lock of hair around her finger provocatively, "All it took was some super glue, since we knew that he'd be in tennis practice this morning. Did you appreciate my handiwork, Kirihara-kun?"

Akaya looked. Anzai Manami was attractive, and had been in his class since elementary school. He smirked. "That was impressive, Anzai-chan."

She blushed. "Well, serves him right. Can you believe that I asked him out and he just said, 'I have practice this afternoon.' Can you believe him!" She complained to her friends. Akaya personally understood why Echizen did what he did. Really, playing tennis or hanging around Anzai the harpy? No big decision there.

The girls commiserated with her. Akaya turned to the guys. "Did you see his face?" he laughed. The other boys laughed with him.

"I bet he's gonna tear his pants trying to get out of his seat while we're gone," one boy said.

"I wanna see that," said another.

"And lunch! He just sat there, and didn't even try to reach for his lunch!" the first boy sneered.

Akaya remembered that. Echizen had remained frozen in his seat, unmoving and unperturbed. Some had tried to taunt him with food, but he was like Gandhi. In fact... did Echizen ever eat lunch? He tried to remember, but only remembered him leaving the classroom as soon as lunch started and then coming back right before classes did.

They didn't do much in physical education; they had as much exercise as he got in walking to the tennis courts. It was a pointless, boring class. Conversely, the way back to the classroom was paved with anticipation. They all wanted to see what had become of Echizen.

And were sorely disappointed when they walked back into the classroom. A student flicked on the lights to reveal Echizen snoring lightly, still sitting in his seat, arms folded on the papers still glued to the desk, and his head on those arms. Sleeping? Was that all he'd done?

The students all filed into the classroom and took their seats, confused as to why Echizen had not tried to do anything. Some

smugly concluded that Echizen had tried to get up and gave up; others were still suspicious. The teacher followed after them and saw Echizen sleeping.

"Echizen," she said. Getting no response, she rapped her ruler on the edge of his desk. "Echizen, wake up! Is this what you did instead of going to P.E.?"

Echizen lifted his head slowly, but Akaya could tell that he hadn't been sleeping; his eyes were too clear and too bright. It was some kind of ruse.

"I don't feel too well," Echizen muttered. Akaya wasn't sure if he was faking or not. Frankly, the boy didn't look too great, but he didn't look tired. Stressed, maybe.

"Then go to the nurse, Echizen," the teacher said with disdain. Echizen nodded and put his hands on the desk to help himself stand. They all waited with bated breath. The teacher would know about the prank and they'd all get in trouble. Or just Anzai. Akaya glanced at Anzai and realized that most of the class was glancing at her too. She was nervous, sweating.

But Echizen just stood up and walked away.

"What!" Anzai shouted. She shot up and they all heard a loud *riiiiiip* . Followed by a squeal. Followed by laughter.

"Oh no, Mana-chan, here, we'll help you!" one of her close friends said once they all realized that the rip had been Anzai's skirt.

The teacher promptly face-palmed and dully said, "There's an extra skirt in one of the cabinets. Anzai, quit blubbering and change. That's indecent."

How had Echizen gotten out? How had he done any of that? Akaya knew what just happened. Echizen just issued his challenge. Akaya had their entire class against him, and he still dared to take his

revenge? Oh, he'd have fun. He'd have loads of fun tormenting him. He would push Echizen. He would push the boy so far that Akaya would have his spot back. He would push Echizen Ryoma until Echizen couldn't stand it. And Akaya had the means to do so.

Ryoma really didn't feel well. It wasn't just a ploy to get out of class before that girl realized that her skirt was glued to the seat. It served her right, he thought, since he found the glue in her desk. He forgot her name... but he remembered that she had waylaid him in the hallway before tennis one afternoon. He couldn't remember what the conversation had been about, but he did remember her leaving in a huff with her arms crossed.

And there was an extra skirt in the cabinet anyway. No real harm done.

He wondered if this was going to be a one-time thing. It must have been. But then, why had no one helped him? This was class 1-A, the smartest kids in his grade. Surely there were some nice people among the sharks, right?

This was the first day that he saw his classmates eating lunch. Back in America, everyone went to the cafeteria for lunch. But here, it seemed that everyone stayed in the classroom and ate from their bentos. What he wouldn't give to taste some of the food he saw today...

And Kirihara had been staring at him the entire time, taunting him. Ryoma had to wonder if Kirihara was behind all of this. Sure, it had been that girl who had glued him down, but Kirihara hadn't even offered his help. No one had. But it especially irked him that Kirihara hadn't. They were in the tennis club together, they were teammates!

It was obvious to Ryoma that Kirihara really didn't like him. He visited the nurse's office for a lollipop and then walked to the tennis courts. It was last period anyway, English, and since he was fluent in the language, he doubted anyone would give him trouble for skipping.

A few minutes later, he had gotten his racket out and was hitting a tennis ball against the brick of a wall, thinking. About how ridiculous it was that he, Echizen Ryoma, was being picked on. He hadn't been picked on since he was a kid and Ryoga lived with him. Ryoga... whatever happened to him? Did he even know that their dad was dead? Surely he would have come back and visited... but they had moved away from the United States so quickly that maybe he couldn't find them. Or maybe his mother had rushed the move for that reason. He remembered a short vacation in Japan, from which only he and his mother returned; a month later, Echizen Nanjiroh had come back with an addition named Ryoga. She had never seemed overly fond of the boy's sudden appearance. And life never seemed to be very good for her either. With a degree from Tokyo University and an education at UCLA Law School, what did she have to show for it?

"I wonder what that brick wall did to you."

Ryoma didn't stop. He glanced to the side and saw Yukimura-fukubuchou. Vice Captain who might as well already be captain. People respected him more than Nishiki-buchou anyway. "Nothing," Ryoma answered without losing his pace, "just thinking."

"About what?" Yukimura-fukubuchou asked. Ryoma had no idea why Yukimura-senpai seemed to have an interest in him.

Then something occurred to him. "Why is Kirihara such an asshole?" he wanted to ask. But he didn't. Instead, he asked, "What's been eating at Kirihara-san?"

Yukimura-senpai laughed lightly, the laugh of songbirds in the morning. It was musical and pleasant, so different from the jeers of his classmates. "You're simply better than him. And he can't stand it."

That answer didn't seem enough. "And everyone else?"

"Everyone else on the team can't believe you're good enough to best him. We've all seen his capabilities. We went to middle school with

him. We were his mentors, his protectors, his nii-tachi. They want to see him succeed." Yukimura-fukubuchou didn't seem annoyed at the questioning. In fact, it seemed like his senpai was enjoying himself.

Ryoma never stopped hitting the tennis ball. "And you don't?"

"I don't want to see new talent go to waste."

That was when Ryoma caught the tennis ball as it zoomed toward him. He turned and looked Yukimura-senpai in the eye. He searched those eyes for honesty, for the kind of soulfulness he hadn't seen since the tennis players in the diner. He searched for anything that could convince him to put his trust in a person who would be his buchou next year.

"Then why don't you do something?"

And he walked away without waiting for a response. Ryoma didn't want to know the answer. He knew the it would be one of two: "I can't," or "I won't." And he couldn't bear to hear either one. For some strange reason, everyone at Rikkaidai had a fierce loyalty to the school. And Yukimura-senpai would never side with a lone freshman against the school. It just wasn't possible.

It occurred to Ryoma, after he had left, that Yukimura-senpai would only know of events that happen in the tennis club. And so far, Ryoma hadn't let any of Kirihara's... antics leak to the older players. The ones in their year knew about Kirihara's antagonism toward him well enough, but the seniors and juniors could have known nothing.

It occurred to Ryoma that, had he stayed to listen to his answer, Yukimura-senpai could have said, "What are you talking about?" or "Is there a problem I can help with?" Because the older players knew nothing of what went on in classroom 1-A anyway. Sure, they'd hear some half-mutilated rumor about someone being bullied, but the rumor wouldn't be substantial enough to drive anyone to act.

It occurred to Ryoma that he could have told Yukimura-senpai his problems and Yukimura-senpai would have helped him. After all, he had just aligned himself with Ryoma rather than Kirihara; he'd just said so. As Ryoma walked to the tennis courts for practice, he hoped he hadn't just royally screwed up a relationship that would keep him sane.

"How was school today?"

"... fun. I got to skip P.E. today, and I had an interesting conversation with my vice captain. He thinks I have talent," Ryoma was used to jazzing up the events of the day for his mother. "You?"

"Work was fine. Did you know that the son of the CEO goes to your school?" she said with a tired smile. No, Ryoma hadn't known that.

"What's his name?" Ryoma asked. Hopefully it wasn't someone he knew. Every person he knew at Rikkai was an asshole, with the exception of Yukimura-fukubuchou.

"Sanada."

Ryoma paused. Sanada Genichirou. "Probably the father of Sanada Genichirou-senpai," he said aloud. "He's going to be vice captain of the tennis team next year." Sanada-senpai wasn't so bad, Ryoma ammended mentally.

"What a delightful surprise!" she exclaimed. Ryoma smiled. "Sanada-senpai is really encouraging, though he's a lot sterner than either Yukimura-fukubuchou or Nishiki-buchou. They need him to keep everyone in line."

His mom giggled. "That's exactly what Sanada-san is like! How funny," she said, shaking her head in what seemed to be disbelief. This was how Ryoma got by. Mixing fact with fiction and making his mom laugh. These were the moments that Ryoma treasured,

because it was almost like the days when they lived in a comfortable house in Los Angeles. Except that Oyaji still couldn't come home.

It was past midnight, but they were both still sewing eyes onto stuffed animals. Gray hippos this time. He settled himself by the kotatsu across from his kaa-san. It wasn't yet cold enough to require the ratty heavy blanket that came with it when they bought it at a second hand shop. For now, it was just a table. He knew they'd need to use it in the upcoming months.

"Did you take your medicine?" he reminded her. She forgot every so often, but since she had been dealing with it for years, she usually didn't.

"M-hm," she answered in the affirmative, unoffended by his question. It was a valid concern and she understood why he asked. Ryoma worried about her. The medicine cost money, and government help only went so far.

They worked in silence, as they did so often, and found no reason to speak. Ryoma found that these were the moments he liked best. His mother was softly humming a tune that couldn't have possibly been a tune, and he was swaying to the music that wasn't quite music. It was nice.

Next chapter: Echizen Ryoma and the Seigaku Regulars

Notes: I just want to remind readers that reviews are little courteous ways of letting the author know that you appreciated his work. Also, it's kind of the payment for writing. I write and share a bit of myself, and readers in return share a bit of themselves, be it in opinions or criticisms. I like opinions the most, real in depth, this-is-what-I-felt opinions. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Echizen Ryoma and the Seigaku Regulars

Chapter Four: Echizen Ryoma and the Seigaku Regulars

He groaned the next time he saw the same eight boys in the same crowded booth. He had no idea when they decided that *his* diner was their hanging spot, but he hoped they'd go somewhere else soon. He had lost count of how many times he'd seen them in the past two months. About thirteen, he estimated.

Ignoring all conventional wisdom, Ryoma walked straight up to them. "Are you all stalking me?" he asked directly.

They all looked surprised, with the exception of the brown-haired one who never opened his eyes. Ryoma was never sure what he was thinking.

"Who said we were stalking?" - "Stalking, what stalking?" - "Why does everything have to be about you?" - "Yeah, we can't just enjoy a good burger?"

Ryoma blinked a few times. And shook his head in exasperation. "Whatever. What do you want?"

"Your name." That smiling, closed-eyed, blunt one!

"None of your business. I don't even know you."

"Fuji Shuusuke. You?"

"Don't care. Now, what *drinks* do you want?" Ryoma knew how to deal with uncooperative customers, but he never had people like these. People who didn't look down on him because he was young and he was working at a diner. They were loud, brash, vocal, and the only one who could control them didn't feel the need to unless other patrons were giving them looks. Ryoma swore that the stoic boy was

getting some entertainment in seeing the others harass him. At least he had a name for one of them. Fuji. It suited him.

It seemed that he should have learned their names by now, since they were loud and affectionate toward each other and sometimes himself, but he just wasn't good at remembering names when he wasn't properly introduced. He kind of knew what their names were; vaguely. Ryoma wondered what school they were from. Ryo said that they played tennis. Were they any good?

"What do you have here?" the loud redhead asked.

Ryoma almost sighed. It seemed that they were all illiterate too, because they never knew how to look for the drinks on the back of the menu. Even after a month of coming here. He recited the list of drinks mechanically just as he had the first night they were there. Everyone at the booth excitedly said who wanted what.

"I'll have the orange juice!" the redhead shouted. Ryoma nodded, noting that there was really no reason for him to have recited the drinks. They'd probably order the exact thing they had the last fifty times. He almost growled when he got the last order from the last boy with short brown hair because he was right: they ordered the exact same drinks as they had every time. As he turned to leave, the redhead interrupted. "Wait! I've changed my mind. I'll have coca cola." Ryoma nodded and mentally crossed out the previous letters. That was new.

"Okay. Six waters, two cokes. I'll have them for you soon," he said, turning around. Before he could get another step further, someone called out to him.

"Hey! I decided I won't have coke, I'll have water!" Ryoma nodded, hoped the boy saw it, and left to go get the drinks. He heard someone halfheartedly reprimand him for his dress code violation-his cap-as he walked into the kitchen. In a minute or two, Ryoma was back, balancing a large tray with eight glasses on them. With practiced ease, he put each drink in front of the boy who ordered it.

Noticing that they were still perusing the menus, he said, "When you're ready to order, just call me." He left to rest his feet. Once again, the redhead's voice stopped him.

"Nya, we're all ready to order!" he said happily. At least they were always quick nowadays. Ryoma wanted to be out as soon as possible. Ryoma stood before their table and listened for their orders. A few were very indecisive and Ryoma had to work hard to convince them that *no*, they did not offer noodles or sushi at the establishment, and *yes*, it was an American franchise. And they been there many, many times before, so *where did these stupid questions come from?*

Eventually, he had orders from all of them. Walking toward the kitchens, he scribbled down the orders and clipped them onto the revolving metal piece, telling the cook what to make. He spun it around so that he would know there was work to be done. He had one other table under his jurisdiction, and he hadn't taken the customers' orders yet.

Five minutes later, he groaned as he plopped down in a chair in the kitchen. He was wiping himself of the sticky soda, the sticky soda that would stain one of his few shirts. Ryoma hated his job right about now. Sometimes the customers were fine but noisy, like the ones in the booth, but other times, the customers were just obnoxious and noisy. That was the case with his second table. A college kid with long brown hair was cockily and incorrectly showing his friends how to hold a racket with a Western grip, and Ryoma could not help but chuckle at his misinformed arrogance.

The man, or more appropriately, boy, turned around and openly laughed at him. "What, and you know anything about tennis, you urchin?" he asked with haughtiness. Ryoma was tempted to answer, "Yeah, more than you ever will," but he held his tongue. He went back to cleaning a table while he waited for the other table's food to be ready.

The other guy, definitely a college kid by the look of him, was self-importantly swinging the racket back and forth, loudly telling them about western grips while his friends were amazedly telling him how great he was. Ryoma wondered if he was the only one who thought that swinging a racket in the middle of a restaurant was uncouth. He glanced around quickly to see that the others in the diner were warily looking at his group and few people left the diner before they could order, muttering about inconsiderate people. Finally, Ryoma could not take the boy's superciliousness and, irritated, got his attention.

"Hey." The loud-mouth followed the sound of the rebuke, and his eyes landed on Ryoma. "You're too loud," the boy said. He wondered what the tennis players in the booth were thinking as this guy was making a fool of himself.

The man stared at him for a second before dismissing him with an aristocratic sniff. "Heh, I can't believe I just got told off by a grade school kid." Grade school kid? He thought he at least looked like a middle schooler!

The idiot continued to swing his racket until he accidentally hit the back of a young lady with it. The racket fell from the arrogant boy's hand, and the girl fell forward. What was she doing, just standing there anyway? "Watch where you're going!" the boy shouted at her. Ryoma looked at the fallen girl who was rubbing the back of her head, where the tennis racket probably hit. He silently helped her up, noting that all eight of the boys in the booth were standing in indignation, and looked at the man as he was bending down to pick his racket up.

Ryoma smirked and quietly said, "Bingo." The college kid looked to him from the side, and Ryoma continued with his cap lowered. "Clamping it like that, on the upper part of the racket is the correct Western grip."

"What?" the boy asked, more threatening than anything else.

"Oh yeah, the handshake grip you were referring to earlier was the Eastern grip," his smirk widened. "It's easy to get them confused. If you haven't had the experience." The other boy did not miss what he was implying. Ryoma took his rag and started to walk away to the kitchen.

"Hey, you! Wait up!" the boy shouted as Ryoma left. "Arrogant brat!" Ryoma heard the anger in his voice and turned around to see a projectile heading toward him. He dodged the glass bullet, but couldn't avoid being hit by the soda. "Sorry, sorry. My hand slipped."

Ryoma raised an unimpressed eyebrow, seemingly unaffected. "Your grip is weak." He pulled the bill of his hat lower and muttered, "Mada mada dane." He walked away, figuring he'd get someone else to mop up the soda. He was not in the mood.

"Sasabe, you got dissed!" Ryoma could hear from the kitchen. Sasabe was his name. That was how Ryoma found himself wiping vigorously at his shirt. He cleaned himself up as best he could, and when he was presentable, got the food together on a tray.

Ryoma had to make two trips to get the eight entrees to the boys in the booth that should have seated five. "And if you need anything, I'll probably be cleaning," he said. Indeed, as soon as he left, he was cleaning what was left of the mess from the boys with the arrogant one whose name escaped him. Ryo didn't want to do it, and Minato claimed it was his fault anyway. The arrogant boys had gone, he supposed, shortly after he had walked into the kitchen.

He threw away the remains of the glass, and deduced that it would be taken from his paycheck. There it went. Ryoma glanced at the table and noticed they did not leave a tip. He hadn't expected one. He was distracted from his work when he noticed that the previously noisy table of eight people was oddly silent and also had a single addition. He looked to them and noted their serious expressions. The girl who was involved in the accident was sitting in the booth with them, as if she were somewhat familiar with them. It was unnerving

to see them so serious like that. Even though he did not know them that well, it felt weird for them not to be talking.

He tucked the rag into his belt and walked over to the table. He quietly stacked the empty plates on a tray he had close by. He left silently, not speaking a word to them. He deposited the dishes in the sink and peeked out to see if anyone was still there. The diner would be closing soon, so most of the customers had left. Ryoma washed the dishes quickly, threw the rag somewhere, and took his coat off the rack. He walked out to where the dining area was, and realized that the boys and the girl were still there.

Now, they were all happy. They seemed satisfied with something. Nevertheless, he wanted to go home and rest. "Hey," he got their attention. Some were laughing to themselves, and some were content to sit there. Ryoma pointed at the clock. "It's time for the diner to close. You'll have to go." They realized the same, and with a few sheepish smiles, and some very vocal farewells, left. Even though Ryoma was telling them to get out ten minutes earlier than usual, they did not seem to mind. Ryoma noticed that they did not leave tips, just like the other boys. With a glare at their backs, Ryoma threw his ratty coat over onto another booth and found his rag somewhere in the kitchen. He quickly cleaned the table and left the dishes in the sink for someone else. He knew the booth was not that clean, but he really needed to get home. It was going to be midnight by the time he got home at this rate. He put his coat back on and locked the diner up when he left. The others had left a while ago, it seemed, and hadn't told him.

He trudged through the streets and was halfway home when the rain started pouring. His secondhand school jacket was worn and old, and the designer did not make it to withstand rain. It was soaked within seconds. Ryoma miserably walked home in the rain, and he knew he would need to do something about his shoes. They were going to fall apart soon, seeing as if he wanted to, he could stick all his toes out of them. "Perfect," he muttered to himself. It was a Sunday night, and tomorrow would be just another day in hell, in

class 1-A, followed by tennis with the worst team in the history of teams. Ryoma continued his lonely trek home filled with dread for the upcoming day.

Ryoma thought it was simply bullying. A pesky little problem that would go away eventually, even though it had been months since said problem started. However, when his shoes were stolen and his textbooks thrown away every day in November, he wasn't so sure. He always gave as good as he got. But when he was soaked from head to toe from having five buckets of water thrown over him while he was changing in a bathroom stall of the tennis clubhouse, he was completely convinced otherwise. It seemed that even the people on his tennis team were in on it. He couldn't even be sure that Kirihara had done this; it seemed like everyone was against him.

He was being bullied. But Echizen Ryoma was not a victim. He *refused* to think of himself that way. The thing that irked him the most was that he could have been seriously hurt by the buckets. Some were dropped right-side up, water weighing them down. They were metal and heavy with sharp edges, and although the cut on his head felt shallow, it wouldn't stop bleeding.

"Echizen!" Yukimura-fukubuchou exclaimed upon seeing him outside of the clubhouse. "What happened to you?"

He could tell the truth right now, Ryoma thought, but he wasn't going to play the victim. He'd deal with his problems himself. "Someone wasn't very cautious when he was tossing a bucket," he simply said. There. A truth, though a weak truth. At least it didn't sound whiny. It wasn't a very believable truth; one bucket of water did not soak a person from head to toe. But he did not run straight to others when he had a problem. He'd had a lot of setbacks in life, and this would hardly stop him.

"Well, do you have any idea who it was?" the vice captain asked. Yukimura-senpai pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to Ryoma.

"No, no idea," he lied easily. He could have easily said Kiri-hara, since he was the one instigating all of this. He looked thoughtfully at the embroidered cloth in his hands as he told himself not to get Yukimura-senpai involved. "By the way, a handkerchief? Really fukubuchou?" Ryoma tried to lighten the situation with a smirk as he held the cloth to his forehead.

Yukimura-senpai smiled back. "It's Genichirou's. He's old-fashioned like that."

"Sanada-senpai?" Ryoma froze. Wouldn't he mind that Ryoma was getting blood all over his handkerchief? Blood was dangerous.

"Don't worry, Echizen. He cares more for the team's welfare than for any old handkerchief. You should get that washed." Yukimura-fukubuchou led him back into the clubhouse restroom and told him he'd see him tomorrow. Ryoma was grateful for some help. Sometimes, he wasn't sure he would be able to stand the tension at Rikkai without Yukimura-fukubuchou.

"Ochibi, what happened to you!" the redhead exclaimed upon seeing him and a reddened bandage on his forehead. Not to mention that he hadn't completely dried off; all of his clothes had gotten wet and he hadn't taken the time to dry them before running to the diner. The hyper boy rushed to him and started fussing at him.

He tried to understand the motives of the redhead, some stranger who worried more for him than anyone on his team did. 'Even Yukimura-senpai?', his mind asked. No, Yukimura-fukubuchou was his lifeline. He couldn't say that these strangers were any better than Yukimura-fukubuchou.

"Kikumarū, off," a stern voice ordered. It wasn't the same kind of voice that Sanada-senpai had. Sanada-senpai had a stern voice, but one that didn't allow failure or embarrassment. Sanada-senpai was hard and cold. Not that this guy wasn't hard or cold, just that this guy seemed... to genuinely care for the person he was reprimanding.

"Aw, but Buchou, he's hurt!" the redhead exclaimed. A boy with very, very short black hair pulled the one named Kikumaru away.

He looked Ryoma in the eye. "I'm sorry about him. But you should really change that bandage. Tennis accident?"

Why did everyone immediately assume tennis accident? He had never had a tennis accident in which his head bled. What did they think happened, that his opponent knocked the razor sharp edge of a metal tennis ball toward his head and he couldn't dodge it? "Sure," he muttered. Not a lie. Well, he amended in his head, it was a pretty blatant lie. Ryoma was unaccustomed to lying to this group of people. He never needed to edit himself there before.

"Listen, I'm Oishi, and I deal with my teammates' injuries all the time. Let me help."

Ryoma had barely met the guy! What made him think that Ryoma needed his help? But Ryoma knew he'd need help for something other than the gash on his head-five buckets caused a lot more damage than he thought.

He led the Oishi guy to the employee bathroom, noting that the boy was lugging a huge tennis bag behind him. And he let the boy do his work. Oishi had soft hands, gentle hands, safe hands. Ryoma chuckled, thinking that Oishi's hands reminded him of his mother's.

"What're you laughing at?" Oishi asked, humor in his own voice.

Ryoma wondered if he would offend the other boy. He figured he might as well speak his mind; he had never minded offending anyone else before. "You remind me of my mother," Ryoma confessed easily. Instead of feeling offended, the other boy laughed.

"Yeah, that's what the team says," Oishi said, finished with unwrapping the soiled bandage, and paused.

Ryoma wondered why he was just staring at the gash. "So, now do you want to tell me what really happened?" He wondered if it was just a suspicion or if the boy really knew that no tennis accident could cause his injury. Ryoma should have realized that this boy knew what tennis injuries made sense and what didn't.

"No," Ryoma answered. What would this boy do? Would he force an answer out, in which case would make him no different from the bullies in Ryoma's eyes, or would he accept it, which would make him no better than those who watched on and did nothing? *Like Yukimura-fukubuchou*, a rebellious voice whispered in his mind. He shook the thought away-he couldn't think negatively about the only person at Rikkai who cared about him.

"Hm. Head injuries are really dangerous. You could have a concussion, or some kind of internal injury. Since you've already cleansed the wound and put a bandage on, I'm assuming you've had some kind of medical attention by someone who knows what he's doing. Right?" the boy asked.

Ryoma didn't want to lie, but he supposed that he ought to be concerned. "Yeah, kind of..." Did Ryoma himself count?

Oishi nodded his head as if in understanding. "Good, because if there had been some kind of skull fracture, then cleaning the wound with the antiseptic I saw on your bandage or putting any kind pressure on it would have been a really, *really* bad idea. So," he bent down and looked Ryoma in the eye, "can you assuage my worries and tell me that whatever happened, it wasn't enough to fracture your skull?"

Ryoma almost laughed. How would he know? He didn't think a falling bucket could fracture his skull, but he'd heard of weirder things. He doubted he'd be there if his skull were fractured. He was hyper aware of how his head felt, and he'd feel or notice it if anything was wrong. Right? "Yeah, I can, cause it wasn't a big deal and none of your concern," he said defensively.

Oishi smiled. "That's good to hear." The boy really did look relieved. Was he worried over Ryoma? Really? He could hardly believe the care that the other boy took as he wrapped a clean bandage around Ryoma's head. It was tight and secure, nothing like the half-assed job Ryoma had done by himself. Oishi *knew* that a professional hadn't wrapped his head.

"There, good and tight," Oishi said with a sad smile. This guy smiled a lot.

"I, uh, also could you check my back..." Ryoma had seen his back in the mirror of the bathroom. The cuts there really didn't look as bad, for which Ryoma was thankful, but they needed to be taken care of. Anything could get into those cuts. He hadn't trusted Yukimura-fukubuchou with the job, and for some unknown reason, Ryoma felt he could let trust this boy. Just once.

"Sure!" he said with pep. Ryoma had never been in such a position, but he couldn't risk getting infected with bacteria. Or worse. So he self-consciously raised the back of his shirt which was still damp with water.

He expected the other boy to say something, to ask what could have possibly happened, to comment, or *something* . He didn't expect the total silence in which the boy cleaned and put band-aids on the few cuts that were there. "That should do it."

Ryoma's shirt fell back into place and he turned around to see Oishi digging through his bag. Not awkward in the slightest, he wordlessly held out a clean, dry blue and white shirt, a polo. "Thanks... and..." He searched Oishi for the same kind of honesty he had searched for in Yukimura-fukubuchou. But he'd already seen Oishi's integrity and trustworthiness. "You can't tell your teammates." It was obviously a command. Ryoma wasn't accustomed to giving commands, but this time, he needed the other boy to do what he wanted. Before Oishi could say or do anything else, Ryoma was out of there. He wasn't going to risk looking into the boy's eyes and seeing disappointment

or sorrow. He wasn't sure why he cared how the boy felt, but he knew he didn't want to be the cause of this Oishi's troubles.

"There's something wrong with Ochibi," Kikumaru pouted. He wanted to know what to do to help, and Oishi wasn't talking! And the rest of the team wasn't pressing him to talk either.

"I agree. I can say with 100% certainty that those injuries were not caused by tennis, and with 33.3% certainty that there are other injuries," Inui declared. He knew tennis, inside and out, and even a broken tennis racket could not do that kind of damage. Moreover, they had seen the boy's agility, and he could have easily dodged any projectile on the court. In addition, the boy was walking... differently. Which could have been an affect of the same thing that caused his head injury or additional injuries.

And Oishi twitched. Which drove the last percentage up to 70%.

None of the regulars, for now they were all regulars except for Taka, the poor bloke, knew what to do. "We gotta do something, right? We can't just sit here when he could pass out any second!" Momoshiro contributed to the discussion. He was of the passionate sort, the kind who defended the weak and never pulled his punches from those who deserved it.

"Oishi," Tezuka finally said. This was the moment. Only Tezuka-buchou could convince Oishi to tell what had happened to the now dubbed Ochibi. Only Tezuka-buchou had the sheer authority to get Oishi to betray Ochibi's confidence. "If there were a life-threatening problem, do you trust that he would have told you?"

Tezuka knew Oishi well. If Oishi thought there was a life-threatening issue, he would have at least told someone who could help, like his uncle who was a doctor. He cared more about the boy's well-being than whether the boy liked him or not. However, Oishi sometimes didn't stop to consider that people could lie to him or that sometimes, he came off as a pushover.

"Well?" This time it was Fuji who was pressing for information. He was unusually somber, but his eyes were still closed, a sign that he wasn't too worried. It was a comfort for the rest of them.

"I'm sure of it. Tezuka, he knows himself, and he values his life," Oishi chuckled a bit, "He wouldn't risk himself just for the sake of his pride." Oishi knew, because the boy had shown him his back. And the boy's back wasn't anything pretty... sure, there were cuts, but underneath them, he could see some old bruises. And some new bruises. And bruises in between. It surprised Oishi that the kid could walk straight at all. So if there was a possibility that he could be seriously injured, and Oishi had made sure that the boy knew the consequences of a head injury, the boy would have said something. "And shallow head wounds bleed a lot anyway. All the capillaries and stuff." Oishi knew that Ochibi was in some kind of danger, but what could they do? The bruises pointed to more long-term abuse, but what were they supposed to do? Was it his homelife? Were his parents doing such a thing? Or was it a bully?

Fuji nodded. "That's good enough for me. You guys?" Obviously, the two most vocal weren't satisfied, but they knew they weren't getting anything else out of Oishi without facing Fuji's ire.

"Now that we've moved on," Tezuka swiftly changed the topic, "Since it's December already, we need to discuss training for the rest of winter. Which we should have been discussing months ago. Obviously, we can't use the Seigaku courts. Inui?"

"Well, in the winter, our courts are no good. However, if we can find some indoor courts-

"Indoor? Where are you going to find those?" Taka asked, doubtful- Seigaku didn't usually keep practicing during winter; it was only on Tezuka's orders that they continued to practice. Taka was annoyed that he hadn't made the regulars this year. Inui just had the perfect data on him, and Tezuka was an unstoppable force. If he had been up against Oishi or any of the first years, he'd be in. But he didn't hold it against them; he'd had months to come to terms with it and

move on. After all, he hadn't even thought he'd be playing this year at all.

"There is a gym in Kanagawa that specializes on indoor gyms. However, there is a slight setback..."

What could be the setback? Kaidoh couldn't imagine any setbacks. It was a gym. If need be, they would pay for membership (he knew his senpai would do anything to play more tennis) no matter the cost, and a gym would love to have a school with a track record like Seigaku's. They'd made it to the quarterfinals of the Nationals and only lost to the team that ended up winning! That was pretty impressive, he thought. He voiced his opinion, much to Inui's irritation.

"It's the winter training ground for Rikkai Daigaku Fuzoku."

Yep, Kaidoh frowned, that would drive a sword into their plans. Movement in a corner caught his eye. Had Ochibi reacted to that? Maybe he knew something about Rikkaidai.

"Hey," he called. He figured they were on pretty good terms now. Kaidoh hardly thought of him as a punk or brat anymore. Now, he just seemed quietly spirited. "What do you think of Rikkaidai?" Kaidoh could feel the eyes of his fellow regulars on him, but he held a gaze, or more accurately, a staring war, with their waiter.

"What do I think?" the boy asked warily. It was strange, Kaidoh thought, seeing Ochibi wearing a Seigaku shirt. It fit him. Not size wise, but... it just seemed right.

Now, the others seemed interested. "Yeah, what's your opinion of them? You play tennis, you must know something about them. Even the high school is the national champion," Momoshiro said.

"What do you mean, 'even the high school'?" their waiter asked, eyes narrowed.

"Well," Momo started, feeling flustered, "I figured-"

"Never mind," he said, waving off Momo's would-be awkward reply. "I go to Rikkai," said he, in what sounded like a world weary tone. "It's... well, the high school team, from what I see, is very, very good. You should watch out," he added with a smirk. He walked away, leaving Momoshiro half-blubbering to himself.

He looked back to his teammates. "What just happened?" he asked them.

"Ochibi goes to Rikkaidai Middle School and apparently isn't enjoying himself," Fuji concluded aloud for them all. His eyes were open, flashing with determination. And since Fuji's vindictive streak was a mile wide, they knew that whoever had touched their Ochibi would regret it.

Next chapter: Christmas! Or Ryoma vs. the Devil's Pack

Christmas! or Ryoma vs the Devil's Pack

Chapter Five: Christmas! or Ryoma vs the Devil's Pack

"Ochibi, we're here!" Kikumaru sang. It was always Kikumaru who announced their arrival, Ryoma mused. He raised an eyebrow as if to say, 'Really? I hadn't noticed.'

The eight took their seats with ease, and Ryoma didn't even bother to ask what they wanted to drink. Except for Kikumaru. "Coke today, I think!" Ryoma nodded and left, half expecting to hear the redhead call him back and order something else. However, it seemed that today they actually had business to discuss. He could hear Inui-senpai rattling off statistics on other players. Ryoma found it funny, hearing Inui-senpai rattling off all of Rikkai's strengths and weaknesses. A lot of it was right. But everything on Yukimura-fukubuchou was all sorts of jumbled.

The drinks were easy to get, since Ryoma prepared them at least twice a week, and he had the drinks on their table in less than five minutes. But as soon as Ryoma started to go, someone grabbed his elbow and pulled him onto the cushioned seat. Normally, he wouldn't have a problem with this, but the boys at Rikkai had become more violent...

"You okay?" Kaidoh asked him. Ryoma knew all of their last names by now, mostly through osmosis. The only ones he had ever been properly introduced to were Oishi and Fuji.

"Yeah, just a little sore. Tennis was, it was rough today." Ryoma was telling half-truths again, and he thought he saw Oishi's and Fuji's gazes flicker to their buchou.

According to them, Tezuka was really their vice captain, but their current captain said they needed to get accustomed to calling Tezuka their captain and encouraged the members to call him

Buchou. Which meant that Oishi was probably now the vice captain, just like Yukimura-senpai was at the moment.

"About tennis," Momo-chan-senpai (because Momo-chan-san sounded ridiculous and he wasn't about to start calling him Momo-chan) started, "you must play some pretty brutal games..."

"Yes I do," Ryoma responded curtly. He knew where this was going to go, as it had done many times, and decided to diffuse that flame and start another. "You know, that's just because I'm so much better than everyone else. I bet I could best you in a game." He made a show of looking over the entire table with an arrogant air. "All of you, actually. Except maybe Fuji and Tezuka. Tezuka, won't you play a match against me sometime?" Tezuka wasn't *his* buchou.

It worked perfectly, as Momo-chan-senpai and Kaidoh both lunged at him for his disrespect. His reflexes had gotten better since the bullying started and he was able to easily avoid both of them as he stood up in front of their table. "So what're you ordering?" he asked.

"It's not even five," she yawned, "Where are you going today, Ryoma?" Lately, his mother had stopped calling him Nanjiroh. It was a welcome relief, considering all the other crap he had to put up with.

"Since it's winter, the team decided to practice at the indoor courts," he reminded her. He'd reminded her every day of December. She didn't have Alzheimer's, he told himself. The doctors all agreed that it wasn't Alzheimer's. The ones he took her to all seemed to say that it was a strangely manifested form of depression, a kind of insanity. Even a chemical imbalance. But most of them attributed it to depression. Because of many factors, they all suggested.

"Of course," she said with a frown, "But it's Christmas Eve, honey. What time are you planning to come home?" Ryoma didn't know how to answer. He had told his boss that he'd work that night since most of the other waiters would be celebrating. He would have taken his mother to the restaurant to eat, but she still hadn't realized that he

had a job there. He wasn't sure what she thought he was doing out until midnight almost every night, and he wasn't sure what she thought when she looked through the bills and saw that she wasn't as in debt as she should have been.

"Well, I'll be here all day tomorrow, okay? And I'll try to be back by midnight," he quickly said, kissed her on the cheek, and made his escape. These days, he didn't have to worry so much about what would happen when he left the apartment. She seemed happy whenever he was happy, and for some reason, he usually came home happy.

He supposed, he thought with a smile, that it was because of those tennis players who came by the diner at least once a week. They were friendly, and he wasn't afraid to admit that he liked them. Even though they pestered him most of the time, inquiring about whether he was okay or if anyone was bothering him (yes, *they* were bothering him!) he found that he almost... liked their concern. Also, because of all the business they created, his boss gave him a raise. Said it was all because of his moodiness that drew them in. Ryoma didn't care, as long as they continued to stop by.

And then he saw his teammates at the courts. And he wondered why they weren't more like the boys in his diner. Ryoma walked into the building with the indoor courts, intending to lay low the entire practice. Sanada-senpai gave him a fierce glare, as he had done since the beginning of December. Apparently, he did care more about his hand-embroidered handkerchief than Ryoma's welfare.

The gym had three sections, each with eight courts. He was surprised to see that Rikkaidai middle school was here too, but not too many students; enough to share the two courts that seemed to be allotted them. Perhaps it was to encourage them to pursue tennis at the high school. Rikkaidai High School couldn't risk losing good players, not with its fifteen year winning streak at Kantou and going for its third at the Nationals.

"Echizen, you're late. 40 laps, quick," Nishiki said upon seeing him. Nishiki might as well have not been captain. Everybody looked to Yukimura-fukubuchou for guidance these days, and Nishiki was old hat. He wasn't even as good as Yukimura-senpai. Or Sanada-senpai. Or Yanagi-senpai.

"Okay," he responded, purposefully being disrespectful. He knew, *he knew*, that Nishiki was aware of Kirihara's manipulations. He also knew that Nishiki had convinced the principal that every regular ought to pay for his jacket, no exceptions. Yukimura-fukubuchou had mentioned it in passing, not knowing that Ryoma had yet to get his jacket for that very reason. There were no events or tournaments for them to wear the jackets or the uniforms to.

Nishiki narrowed his eyes, and Ryoma was sure that Nishiki knew that Ryoma knew. But it wouldn't make a difference. What did it matter that Ryoma knew that Nishiki knew that Ryoma knew that Nishiki knew about the other members' treatment of him? At some point, it didn't matter who knew what. It only mattered that Nishiki was a damn bastard and a horrible captain.

He had more than proven himself, Ryoma thought. He consistently ran his laps with the regulars when even Kirihara would lag from exhaustion, and he had beaten all of the third years. He trained more, he trained *harder*, than any of the regulars, even Sanada-senpai! He almost beat him in a match a week ago, and still, Nishiki had the nerve to call it off since they were 'supposed to be cleaning, not playing games. Echizen, start picking up balls. Sanada, go practice with Yukimura.' Ryoma had seen Sanada's look of indignation, but even he hadn't said a word. It was like the boy was married to decorum.

By the time he was on his thirty-eighth lap, he had caught up to Kirihara who was already out of breath. "What've you got for me today, Kirihara?" Ryoma asked cheekily. He found it was better than laying down and taking his abuse.

"Loads... of... fun," Kirihara assured him between breaths and a scowl.

"Sounds great," Ryoma smirked and took off, finishing his last two laps with ease. Before Japan, he had no idea how beneficial walking everywhere could be. Or running. Yeah, he was usually running to the diner after tennis since Nishiki often kept him late. His stamina had increased tremendously.

The initial practices weren't too bad, but then Nishiki had sectioned them off by year so that the first year players in the high school had the two courts right next to the two courts of the third year players of the middle school. The high school seniors were in another section of the gym which was for general play; the section they were in right now seemed to be reserved for school practices. Which begged the question of why the seniors had to move at all.

He looked around. There were still two courts left empty, but Ryoma supposed that the Nishiki was full-headed enough to want a special section just for the seniors. It also seemed that the captain of the middle school team was with him, judging from the lost faces of the middle schoolers.

Ryoma started walking over to them, not knowing what he could do to help, but wanting to do something. Yukimura-fukubuchou quickly intercepted him, directing the middle school players. "Why don't you all try this drill?" he suggested for the young boys, showing them a common drill in the Rikkai repertoire. It required no knowledge of players' skill but improved play incredibly anyway and involved many people at once. Yukimura-fukubuchou would be a good captain, Ryoma thought.

"Hey Echizen. I saw what you saw, so I figured I'd help them out," Yukimura-senpai said. He reminded Ryoma of Oishi. They were both so gentle, kind, nothing like everyone else at Rikkai. Ryoma wondered how he survived in such an environment with his calm and unobtrusive temperament in tact.

"Oh. Well, since Nishiki wasn't here-" Ryoma started, suddenly hyper aware that he'd left off the honorific. He was so used to thinking of him as Nishiki, that it seemed more natural.

Yukimura-senpai didn't seem so perturbed by Ryoma's rudeness than by the Nishiki's absence. "Yeah, this was real stupid of him," he said. It was the first time Ryoma heard a negative statement come from him. It was always positive, always calculating and inoffensive.

"What was?" Ryoma wondered out loud. What could have possibly gotten Yukimura-fukubuchou so irked?

"That he booked this place last week! If he had done it earlier, we'd all be in the same section, and there wouldn't be all this chaos," Yukimura-senpai frowned. Ryoma hadn't noticed it earlier, but their section didn't just resemble chaos. Their section *was* chaos.

There were games of two against seven, drills that were done obviously half-assed, and Sanada looked like he was ready to slap everyone. "Well, what can we do?" Ryoma asked. He really wanted to know what he could do to help since it seemed that Yukimura-fukubuchou was getting more and more stressed.

"Keep an eye on the middle schoolers, would you? Can you do your drills and watch them too? It would be a big help."

It was no problem, and Ryoma told him so. Even though he was the same age, or even younger than some of them, he could do it. For Yukimura-buchou.

The older boy smiled and moved back to his section of juniors who, not surprisingly, were the ones playing two against five. It was fascinating, though, how great a team Niou and Yagyuu were. And it was even more fascinating how Yukimura-senpai's calm voice could command such great attention.

Ryoma, taking his mind away from the juniors, walked over to the middle school seniors and asked, "Who's your vice captain?"

"Urayama Shiita! And you?" This kid spoke like a girl.

"... Echizen Ryoma. Yukimura-buchou wants you all to do this drill for however long you decide. You're the captain interim, so keep a good hold on your team," Ryoma simply said, starting to leave. If this boy couldn't handle it, he might as well be a normal member.

"But I'm just the vice captain!" Urayama protested. "I-"

Ryoma looked back at him. "If the current captain is MIA, then you're up. You see Yukimura-fukubuchou? He's stepping up, doing what he can. Try to be like him."

"But he has help. From you," he responded. The kid could've been older than him, for all he knew, but he definitely needed some help in the confidence aisle.

So Ryoma decided he'd have to do more than just glance over at them from time to time as he had initially planned. "And so do you. I'll be watching from the first year court, okay?" Urayama still looked nervous but nodded anyway.

Comforted in part, Ryoma headed back to the court he was supposed to be on.

"Buchou said practice." Kiriara walked up to him. "Said we could pick our own drills. So we came to a consensus," he said, widening his arms to show just how many of the freshmen on his team were against him. "All of us," he gestured to the people behind him, "versus you, one set. After all, you're a regular. You can handle it."

"Sure," Ryoma said. How hard could playing against them be? Only so many could play comfortably on one side of the court, and Ryoma had played against *the* Samurai Nanjiroh practically since he was born. He could handle anything on the court. He glanced at the middle schoolers. They were doing well. And it seemed whoever reserved the other two courts were finally there. Guys in blue and white, from what Ryoma saw.

"So you don't mind making a bet?"

Now, Ryoma was suspicious. "What kind of bet?" He glanced at the kids again. He didn't understand why Urayama had been so nervous.

Kirihara smirked. "If we win, you give up your spot as a regular."

"No bet. That's ridiculous." The kids really were fine, he thought as he forced his attention back onto the matter at hand.

"What's ridiculous about it? It's not like anyone treats you like a regular. And if you're so good, you can beat me at the next ranking match in April. Nothing happens until then anyway." Well, Kirihara had a point. Being a regular now sucked. And if he earned his spot a second time, they'd have to respect him. And he'd get his free jersey.

"What do I get if I win?" Ryoma suddenly asked. Ryoma wasn't risking much, he thought; but what could he gain from this? He glanced one last time over at the middle schoolers, who were still doing fine, and decided that he could play this match without worrying about them.

Kirihara seemed to like smirking, because he did it again. "Whatever you want. Do you want us to stop being mean to poor widdle Echizen?"

"That's good enough." Ryoma didn't really lose anything with this bet, but Kirihara stood much more to gain than Ryoma did. Though having everyone off his back would be a great relief. Literally.

"Fine, when we get back to school, we'll all leave you alone. Like you always are anyway." And Ryoma could handle anything Kirihara and his goons could throw at him. He had so far. So when both Kirihara and another boy walked to the baseline, and another two stood by the net, Ryoma was ready. But when both at the baseline served at the same time, he found himself frozen in place as both balls bounced right past him. He managed to catch one with his racket

and hit it back toward the weakest of the four players on Kirihara's side, but couldn't gather his wits fast enough to get the other.

What now? "No point," a boy on the side declared.

Ryoma, expecting a damn good explanation, glared at Kirihara. "If our side gets both past you, gain a point. If we hit a ball out and you hit a ball out, no point. If we hit a ball past you and if you hit one past us in the same turn, no point. If you get both balls past us, you get a point." Juggling two balls at once? Could he do that?

The three others rotated, pulling a new player onto the court, and Kirihara moved to the right side. At the same time, he and another on the baseline lifted their rackets and let the tennis balls fly. Luckily, the weaker ball was slower, so Ryoma hit Kirihara's ball back to the same loser as last time and then ran for the slower ball, sending that one to the other loser on his left.

"Hey Kirihara, this is fun," Ryoma smirked. As long as there was a discrepancy in the serving time, Ryoma could do this. And he had his own service game to look forward to. Serving two tennis balls at once was an easy challenge to overcome.

"Hey Kirihara, this is *really* fun," Ryoma almost laughed. His service game had been so easy that he'd felt no need to use his left hand in the entire match. He really hadn't understood how inexperienced the rest of the tennis club was compared to the regulars. He could sort of understand Kirihara's frustration. Sort of.

It was 4-0, and really, they were just playing the rest of the game as a formality. And Ryoma found it good exercise for his reflexes.

"Hey!"

Ryoma searched for the source of the disturbance and saw that the middle schoolers were having some kind of mutiny. His head swiveled around to see what Yukimura-fukubuchou was doing, and

to his dismay, the boy was absent. Where was he, Ryoma thought, panicked.

The kids were so stupid! He just had to win this game and the next, and his problems would be over!

But he could clearly see Urayama's worried face, his eyes filling with tears, and Ryoma couldn't just stand there when he had stupidly promised he would help. And dammit, the boy was looking straight at him now. And was pushed to the ground by another boy.

He turned to see Kirihara's irritating smirking face, and Ryoma just wanted to throw his racket at him. He stepped off the court, but paused midstep when he heard the other boy's slimy voice. "Do you forfeit?"

Ryoma ignored him and continued walking until he got to the middle school court. From what he was now hearing, a player thought himself better than Urayama, that *he* should decide what they do because it wasn't as if Yukimura-senpai had given instructions to him personally.

"So you're the best here?" Ryoma asked, walking onto the middle school's court. He was thankful, for once, that he looked his age or younger. It would make this other guy's humiliation so much sweeter. Urayama turned to him with a thankful expression on his face, but Ryoma silenced him with a sharp look.

"Yeah, so what?" This boy had darker colored hair that stood up toward the bottom, much like Kikumaru, Ryoma thought. But this boy was nothing like Kikumaru.

"Can you teach me?" Ryoma knew he exuded innocence.

6-0, with no effort at all on Ryoma's part. "I guess when your vice captain tells you something, you ought to listen." He walked away. The damage was done. This upstart was humiliated, and maybe he'd learn how to manifest his talent in a good way. Urayama kid didn't

become vice captain because of his leadership skills. He was like the Oishi, or the Yukimura-fukubuchou, of the middle school team. And every team needed one of that sort of person to lead it. Urayama simply needed to work on it a little.

As he was walking back to his court to finish the game, he felt a hand yank his arm so strongly that his cap fell off. It wasn't even a freshman. It was a second year student, a very large second year student. He was whirled around so that he was facing Kiri-hara. "Your game's finished, Echizen," he hissed.

"I never forfeited," he snapped back. Ryoma wasn't going to take this. He struggled in the older boy's grip.

"We decided for you." Kiri-hara looked so self-assured, with his arms crossed and his posse backing him up.

"Hell no," Ryoma scoffed. He forcefully yanked his arm out of his aggressor's grasp, only to have someone else, probably Kiri-hara, grab his hair and pull his head back so far he thought his neck would snap. The large second year student and another rather large student blocked other people from seeing.

Kiri-hara was such a snake. "Hell yea . So you better get off your high pedestal-oomf!" Ryoma kicked his leg back into Kiri-hara's crotch, rejoicing as the hold on his hair loosened. He ducked past the larger students and yanked the door open to a hallway and then another door that led to what he hoped was another section. No, no such luck for Echizen Ryoma. He tried to close the door of the closet behind him, because hiding safe in a closet was better than getting beaten up in a hallway, but he had lost time in opening doors, and he'd forgotten that Kiri-hara was almost as quick as he was.

"Ooh, Echizen, what've we got here? Hiding in a closet now? Where did all of that pride go?" a boy, who was not Kiri-hara, sneered.

"Not looking down on us now, huh, Echizen?" another boy towered over him. Nope, Ryoma really wasn't in the place to look down on

anyone. He was yanked up and out of the small space by his shirt, and punched soundly in the face. Sure, he'd been punched in the face before, but never by someone as big as this guy.

Ryoma fought, kicked and bit, but there seemed to be hundreds against himself, and everyone wanted a piece of him. Eyes closed, he continued kicking and struggling until there was nothing left to struggle against. Suddenly, he was hyper aware of everything around him, the rough socks on his feet inside his shoes that were firmly planted on the ground, his liquidy arms that swayed a bit, and his double vision that could have been caused by-wait no, that was gone. Seeing clearly, he froze.

The fluorescent lights gave them an eerie glow that only made their angry expressions fiercer. Their eyes were glowing with rage, but it wasn't directed toward him.

"Ochibi, you're alive!" Ryoma flinched and gasped when he felt the boy's arms wrap around him. He was much stronger than he looked.

"Eiji, you're hurting him-" "Oh no, Ochibi, I'm sorry, can you ever forgive me?"

"Sure, go away." Ryoma was more than embarrassed. Where did these guys come from? Wait. They had spoken about training... Ryoma groaned.

"Ayah, I really hurt him!" Kikumarū went off to do whatever, Ryoma couldn't care less at the moment. Someone started to help him stand, and Ryoma was surprised to see Inui holding him up.

"Do they *know* you? They're from Seishun Gakuen." Sanada-senpai appeared and asked. He was standing next to Tezuka, both looking mightily imposing.

"Do *you* know *them* ?" Ryoma wasn't sure how to answer. He hadn't gotten permission to work, but he had met them there, and admitting

that he was on somewhat friendly terms with another tennis team was suicide in Rikkai.

"Sanada, isn't it?" Fuji asked in his friendly manner. "You should really keep a better hold on your members. Imagine, attacking a middle schooler like that. Though I wonder if there was a reason." Fuji kneeled down to Ryoma's level since he still hadn't gotten up. "Little guy, this isn't a one time thing, right? Or is it?"

Fuji was smart. And Fuji could tell that Ryoma would have been in big trouble if the truth came out. Though he did wonder if they still thought he was in middle school.

"Ochibi?" Fuji used Kikumaru's pet name, perhaps to downplay the other boy's use of it earlier, or maybe to help Ryoma think clearly.

His mouth was dry. Instead of speaking, since Echizen Ryoma hardly did that at Rikkai anyway, he shook his head.

"Now that's a strange way to phrase a question," Momo-chan-senpai said. Really, asking a negative question was only looking for trouble, Ryoma thought. Catching on to Fuji's ploy, Momo-chan-senpai asked, "Kid, has this happened before?"

Ryoma felt himself blush in embarrassment. How many times would he have to admit that he was weak, that he couldn't defend himself? He nodded and hid his eyes under his bangs since he no longer had his cap. He felt so naked without his hat. The last thing he wanted to see was Sanada's face, because he was sure the other boy would be angry at him for making Rikkai look bad. But he couldn't handle the tension and the silence, so he looked up and realized that Sanada had left.

"So it's been them all along?" Oishi asked angrily. Of course, only Oishi knew anything about the full extent of the bullying. Ryoma was sure he'd seen the bruises beneath his cuts that day. But it wasn't a big deal; Ryoma gave as good as he got, even if it meant making everyone else in his class his enemy.

"So what? I handled them easily enough," Ryoma tried to defend himself, but was met with dubious eyes. "Except not today." Scenes like this had never happened before, not like this. He was usually able to escape.

"Ochibi, they're high schoolers! They could have really hurt you!" Taka-san said. So they *did* think he was in middle school. All the better, he thought, so they didn't have to lie as much for his sake. He nodded his thanks, knowing that they wouldn't necessarily expect him to respond vocally.

He left in time to walk into the section he had just escaped from to see a frightening sight and a thunderous clap. The backhand had been strong enough to sweep Kirihara off his feet and land in a heap on the floor. It seemed Sanada wasn't afraid of scaring the middle school kids away. He was the stern type, and he liked order. And if anyone threatened that, Ryoma thought, even beloved Kirihara, Sanada would not deal with it.

By the time the tennis players from the diner-no, Seigaku-rushed in, Kirihara was on his feet and Sanada was walking away. Ryoma had to wonder. What had just happened? Did Sanada really just release his anger on Kirihara? What kind of leadership was that, Ryoma wondered. As far as he saw, it was just hypocrisy.

"Oi, Ochibi, let's goooo!" Kikumaru whined. Ryoma looked at him. What?

"I convinced your vice captain to let us take you to the hospital... since we were ready to leave anyway," Tezuka told him. The hospital? Ryoma was not spending the rest of his horrible day at a hospital, and he told him so. Also, they had just gotten there, Ryoma knew, and they were lying about being ready to leave.

"Are you daft?" Kaidoh whispered. "We're breaking you out. But they don't have to know," he said, tilting his head toward the juniors and Yukimura-senpai, who had made a miraculous appearance. Ryoma wasn't sure. He'd never spent time with them outside of the diner,

and he wondered if he really knew them as well as he thought he did.

But Ryoma was the kind to take fantastic risks, just like his own parents. Taka-san had a car that really was supposed to fit seven, but of course, the tennis players all had practice with fitting into spaces that should have held less. They had all absconded the tennis courts even though Tezuka had reserved it for the day, probably a month in advance.

"Where are we going?" Ryoma asked. "Not to a hospital, right?"

"Well..." Oishi started. Ryoma knew Oishi could never tell a lie. So the fact that the boy was hedging meant that it was going to be something he wouldn't like. "My uncle's a doctor, so he can take real good care of you."

"Especially since that's going to be one heck of a shiner," Taka-san muttered, inspecting Ryoma's soon to be black eye.

"Eyes on the road, Taka!"

The visit to Oishi's uncle was quick and simple, and the doctor didn't ask too many questions. He seemed to trust Oishi just as Tezuka did. "The problem's been taken care of," Oishi had simply told the older man, and he had taken his word for it. There was not a person in the universe who could not trust Oishi. Ryoma figured even if it was going against every doctorly bone in the man's body, he would still trust Oishi.

"Now, what to do...? It's Christmas Eve, guys," Momo-chan-senpai reminded them.

"What were you planning to do after your practice?" Ryoma asked. It was the logical progression of the conversation.

"Well, we thought that we'd see you at the diner tomorrow on Christmas since you seem to work there everyday. And then give

you your Christmas present-oh. Never mind, I didn't say anything."

"Christmas present?" Ryoma asked, glancing at the boys. A Christmas present?

"Didn't I say there was a 90% chance that it would be Momo who blew it?"

Ryoma looked at Kaidoh who seemed to groan. "I was almost sure that Kikumaru would have done it," he said, reaching into his wallet to hand a bill to Inui. It was a crisp 2000 yen, and Ryoma couldn't help but think about how *wasteful* these boys were. Didn't they know how much 2000 yen could buy?

Of course, these were the same boys who were dropping a festively wrapped box into his lap and were all looking on in expectation for him to open it. Taka even parked the car so he could turn around in his seat and watch the unfolding. Suddenly feeling self-conscious, Ryoma crossed his arms and refused to look at any of them.

"C'mon, Ochibi!" Kikumaru complained. Obviously, he had been waiting for this moment for a long time.

"It's not Christmas yet anyway," he argued. It seemed like the rest of them were going to force him to open it until Fuji put a hand on Kikumaru's shoulder and pulled him back.

"Saa, he's right after all." Ryoma wasn't sure if he should be worried that Fuji was taking his side. "You only open presents on Christmas, *after midnight*, is that how you do it?"

Ryoma nodded, and he knew he was supposed to be worried. "Then let's do it Ochibi's way."

And that's how Ryoma found himself standing in front of his apartment at 11:45 PM, eight really excited Seigaku boys trailing behind him. He had hoped they would tire out from racing and tearing through Tokyo and Kanagawa (he had even done his shift at

the diner, with the boys all sitting nicely in their booth) before he had to run home to keep his promise of being back before midnight. He wasn't sure if bringing them back here was such a good idea. His mother, he thought, would love to see the friends he talked about. But they didn't know he was in high school, and he really didn't want to tell them... so he fabricated another small lie. And asked them to go along with it.

"My mother thinks I have a lot of friends," he started. Annoyingly enough, they all seemed to understand immediately. "I told her they're in high school. So all you have to do is pretend you're on the high school tennis team at Rikkai." They all nodded in understanding.

He opened the door a crack. "Kaa-san, I'm home and I brought some friends with me," he announced as he toed off his shoes. He hoped, he willed, that she was in the present. That she wouldn't ask for Nanjiroh.

"Honey, you didn't say you were bringing your friends over!" She opened the door wider and turned to the boys, saying, "Call me Obachan, ne?" Ryoma thought she was being just a little too familiar with them, and what was that dress she was wearing? He couldn't remember the last time his mother had fixed herself up so prettily.

"They're not staying," he said shortly, analyzing the change in his mother. "They just wanted to be here until midnight, and then they're leaving." Ryoma didn't want to reveal how small his apartment was, or how messy and unorganized his empty home was.

"Then at least let them in!" she said, throwing open the door to a completely different apartment from the one he'd left that morning. For one, it was clean. She quickly ushered them all in and had them sit down on cushions and chairs that Ryoma didn't recognize. Then she came back from the kitchen with bowls filled with chips and dip and placed them on the kotatsu whose thick new comforter he had never seen before. There were paintings on the walls he didn't recall having, and he concluded that something was wrong. After he had

looked around and noticed the unorthodox changes, he glanced back to see his mother conversing with Taka-san and Fuji, all nine of them somehow fitting their legs under the comforter.

"My husband was at the top of the professional tennis world when my baby was born. He was a brilliant player, just amazing, and he could even predict when he would win. It was a kind of foresight! You'll meet him when he gets home-"

The boys just listened in amazement. They were eating it all up, except for Tezuka and Fuji whose expressions Ryoma could never read.

He walked around to his mother and whispered, "We need to talk in the other room." He helped her to her feet and louder, he said to the others, "We'll be back soon."

In the comfortable semi-darkness of his bedroom, he had his mother sit down. "You went shopping today," he said simply to prompt her.

"Of course, sweetie! Can you believe we've been in Japan for such a long time and we haven't even decorated the place? Imagine living in Japan again and not having a good comfortable kotatsu!" she laughed.

"Kaa-san!" he whispered urgently, "Don't you know why we haven't decorated the apartment?"

"It was... it was money," she concluded after trying to remember. "But nonsense, my job pays more than enough for this tiny place," she said. Ryoma could tell that she was starting to remember.

"And why are we in Japan now, when he had planned to move next April?"

"Because... because... Nanako showed up for the funeral. And I didn't want to see her or Ryoga, and the neighbors were talking about how... how sad it was to be a widow... Ryoma, oh Ryoma, are

you still here? Really?" She reached out for him and he let her melt into his arms. Her hand came up and held his cheek, tracing the bruise that would form there.

"Yeah, I'm here." He looked at her, with her unfocused gaze and her trembling fingers. She was not going to come back so easily this time. "Listen, I'll just tell them to go..."

"No," she said sharply, "No," she softened. "I'm fine honey, let's go back out." She composed herself, and briefly, Ryoma saw the strong legal woman he had seen arguing and making short speeches in the LA courthouses. She would have been made district attorney soon, he was sure.

"Sorry about that, boys," he heard from outside the room. Wow, she was fast. "Now, it is quite late. Won't your families be worried?"

"Oba-chan is so sweet!" Kikumaru squealed and hugged the now weary-looking woman. "All our parents think we're practicing tennis and then staying over at someone else's house. They won't mind that we're at Ochibi's!" Ryoma closed the bedroom door behind him.

Ryoma's mom smiled. "My oldest son used to call him something like that," she said craftily winking at Ryoma, "Chibisuke, he called him. Because he was so cute, holding his little racket."

"Chibisuke!"

"Oh, I left something in the kitchen!" She power-walked into the kitchen area and from there called out, "Someone kill the lights over there!" Immediately, the entire apartment was flooded with darkness, except for a soft orange light coming from the kitchen.

"Ha..." she walked into the main living area, "ppy..." she set the cake on the table, "Birth..." she looked around, expecting the others to sing, "day to you, happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear Ryoma," choruses of 'Ochibi' were heard much louder, "Happy birthday to you!"

The Seigaku regulars all looked very confused and Ryoma was blushing. He hadn't really expected a cake, and wondered if this was one of his kaa-san's crazy purchases from the day. He looked to her over the candles.

"I ordered it a week ago. See? There's a tennis ball, right there." It did indeed have a fancily iced tennis ball, and some quick shaky icing writing that read 'Happy B-Day.'

Ryoma looked around, seeing the visages of the Seigaku team and his mother lit up with the weak but beautiful light of fifteen candles. And he blew them out, letting the darkness take them away. For a split second, Ryoma was alone in the world, only knowing that he was being, that he was hearing and seeing nothing else.

"I can say with a strong degree of certainty that there will be difficulties in getting to the light switch."

"Not so!" Echizen Rinko declared, firing up the lighter. Easily, Ryoma navigated the living room toward the light switch. He was surprised that the regulars hadn't revealed that they had no idea it was his birthday. That could have been bad.

"Happy Christmas and Happy Birthday, Ochibi," said, surprisingly, Kaidoh. The wrapped present from earlier sailed into his arms, and he realized he had no choice but to open it now. He had never really gotten a birthday present or a Christmas present from friends. He was used to not having any, even in the States.

He carefully lifted the edges from each other, much to Momo's and Kikumaru's shared frustration, and in time revealed a shoebox. In which were two tissue-wrapped Fila Mids, two wonderful shoes that were immaculate and *his* .

"Did you look under the cover?" Taka prodded. Ryoma was so shocked at even receiving a thoughtful gift that he wasn't sure what he'd do if whatever was on the side was sentimental in any way. He lifted the cover and saw a gift card taped to the other side.

"We figured we didn't know what tennis stuff you need," Oishi said, embarrassed.

"But we want you to be a good rival next year," Fuji said.

"Since you'll be at Rikkai," Momo finished.

Ryoma wasn't sure what he treasured more. The fact that they actually bought him a Christmas gift and were witness to his first real birthday party, or that they were willing to keep his secret even from his mom. They were friends, he thought. The kind of friends he had always heard of but never seen, not even in California. They were his friends.

Next chapter: Echizen Ryoma vs. the Rikkai Regulars

Echizen Ryoma vs the Rikkai Regulars

Chapter Six: Echizen Ryoma vs the Rikkaidai Regulars

Sanada hadn't let him give up his spot as a regular to Kirihara (not that he would have) as Kirihara demanded, mostly because there was nothing in the rulebooks that allowed such a thing. Nishiki had only been too happy to give the privilege to the red-eyed bastard, but Sanada's piercing look stopped him in his tracks.

Ryoma wasn't sure what to say in this case. "... Thank you, Sanada-senpai."

"Kirihara has to re-earn his spot." The older boy looked down at him. "As do you."

"What?"

"Obviously, you don't take being a regular seriously if you're willing to put it on the line in a bet. Which you lost," Sanada glared at him. Ryoma glared back-he hadn't even really lost that game. "And then you just leave in the middle of practice without a valid excuse?" Ryoma wondered if Sanada hadn't seen the shit being beaten out of him; his excuse had been more than valid. "So neither of you will be a regular until one of you earns it in April."

Next school year. Really? They'd sit him out so long? They had already given the newcomer spot to Kirihara, who, much to Ryoma's ire, played and won against Hyotei's Hiyoshi Wakashi in the Finals. From what he saw, Ryoma could have beaten him too. He'd seen the kid with the weird mushroom haircut, and he did seem to give Kirihara some trouble. 7-6, it had been. Ryoma bet he could have gotten at least one game using just his right hand.

He looked at the boy who would be his vice captain next year. "You don't like me," he said bluntly. He was taking lack-of-subtlety lessons

from Fuji on how to get what you wanted, and he wanted to know the truth. According to the mild boy, being obtuse was one of the easiest ways.

"I don't have to like you to work with you," Sanada said and turned his heel. Ryoma was distinctly reminded of another quiet yet strong character. Tezuka. He was a real captain. Ryoma watched Sanada walking away and wished, not for the first time, that his captain were Tezuka-buchou.

It felt like the winter season was still upon them even though it was February. Valentine's Day came and went, mostly with hate mail but also with the occasional genuine card, much to Ryoma's surprise. He was starting to wonder who hated him and who just couldn't bring themselves to help. The snow still fell, with flakes making the trek to and from Rikkai almost unbearable, but the entire country had already celebrated Setsubun, the beginning of spring. Ryoma was thankful that his new shoes kept out the wetness of the snow and ice. He remembered when just two months ago he had to walk home from Rikkai and then to the diner and then home in his soggy worn tennis shoes.

But now he thought of the Seigaku regulars every time he set foot into the melting snow, because he knew that the eight of them had no idea what the shoes meant to him. And the gift card.

His relationship with Rikkai seemed to deteriorate, though. Of course, the bullying stopped, thanks mostly to Sanada's backhand of doom, but the cold stares and the teasing of his peers had come to an all time high. Ryoma was mostly impervious to it because he knew he had a group of energetic tennis players waiting for him at the diner, and nothing they could say could change that. Oishi still asked him every time if he was okay, and Ryoma was always happy to tell the truth that yes, he was fine, and stop worrying, he was made of strong stuff.

Even though he wasn't on good terms with all of the Rikkai regulars, Ryoma still accompanied them when they were off for the indoor tennis courts again. There were others in the tennis club who came with them, working so they could be competitive in the ranking matches in April. Of course, many of the tennis club members played other sports during tennis off-season. Jackal was the captain of the basketball team even though he was only a second year and also the co-captain to Rikkai's dance team. Marui was even part of a bowling league. Sanada-senpai continued his kendo during tennis season; it wasn't the type of sport that really had a season anyway, and Sanada was apparently one of the best in Japan. Surprisingly, or perhaps not as surprising at all to those who knew him, Niou was heavily into theatre and hunting whenever he wasn't playing tennis.

Because of everyone's other commitments, off-season practice was relegated to the weekends and Friday afternoons, and the middle school tennis team never showed up again. Ryoma, already waiting on the platform with Yukimura-fukubuchou, watched his team walk down the stairs toward them. He looked at the empty train pulling to a stop at the platform; they wouldn't have a problem fitting into the spacious compartments, and even this reminded him of the difference between the Rikkaidai and Seigaku regulars.

"You really are very good," Yukimura-fukubuchou quietly said to him.

"Fukubuchou?" Ryoma had no idea where this was coming from. They never really seemed to have time between the two of them, and it seemed Yukimura-senpai was taking advantage of the moments in which it was certain that the rest of Rikkai would not be eavesdropping.

"Kirihara can't lead Rikkai to the Nationals. You can. You can lead Rikkai to win," Yukimura-fukubuchou declared, never removing his eyes from where the train would be. He really didn't know how to answer so he just looked up at his vice captain. Ryoma wondered if winning was the only reason Yukimura-senpai talked to him at all.

It didn't happen in slow motion, and it didn't feel like an eternity as the other Rikkai regulars would later recount. One second, Yukimura-fukubuchou was standing straight and tall on the platform, like the gentlest god on Mount Olympus, and the next second, he was on his side on the dirty floor, his eyes wide in fear, closing, scrunching up, and his body still and limp like Oyaji's corpse.

His eyes were closed but he was alive.

"Yukimura!" That was Sanada-senpai. Ryoma felt himself being pushed to the side so that Sanada could get closer to the fallen child of God. His scarf looked disorderly on his usually orderly self and his teeth were clenched. Later, Ryoma would say that shock prevented him from moving and helping the boy, but he knew that when he saw the young man still as death, all he could think about was Oyaji.

On the rooftop garden of the hospital, Yukimura-fukubuchou sat in a pair of patient clothes. The sunset was beautiful but nobody on that roof paid attention to it. The winter breeze was refreshingly chilly, but it seemed that they were all frozen in time. For some reason, Ryoma felt that this was some kind of personal team meeting that he wasn't supposed to be a part of. Looking on, he realized that even Kirihara looked like he belonged in that group concernedly surrounding Yukimura-senpai.

"Firstly, I'll be devoting my time to healing. It'll take a while, they said."

Ryoma could tell from Kirihara's tense shoulders and shaking head that he was ready to explode. "But if Yukimura-buchou isn't here, we'll have a huge blind spot!"

"It may not have been expected, but don't let my condition overwhelm you. We'll still win the Nationals," he answered calmly. Ryoma thought he had a one-track mind.

"No, no, that's not what I meant!" Kiri-hara pleaded with him. It was obvious to Ryoma that Kiri-hara desperately relied on Yukimura-fukubuchou. They had a connection he couldn't even imagine having with another Rikkai regular.

"Shit. This can't be real," someone said, probably Jackal. Ryoma didn't know the regulars well enough to tell.

Ryoma didn't want to hear more of this and walked back into the building. He hated hospitals. He had been really appreciative toward Oishi when he had taken him to his uncle's house rather than to a clinic. Ryoma hated the smell, the look, the people.

The hospital in Los Angeles hadn't been white, he remembered. The tiles were a purposeful maroon in one wing and a dark green in another. He only ever visited those two wings anyway. Oyaji's room had been off-white, as if the hospital was trying everything in its power not to fit the stereotype. But it was still sterile and smelled like chemicals.

He remembered sitting on the window seat looking out over the city, hoping that he'd be able to see Tokyo like this, because Oyaji promised him that they'd all go to Tokyo together once he got better. He remembered spending sleepless nights watching his mother slowly going crazy. She would go about the day thinking that Nanjiroh would come home like he did everyday, and she would forget to go to the office or look at cases. She never visited him in the hospital, almost afraid to see the reality. There was no hope, they said. Ryoma didn't want to hear it.

There was no such thing as "no hope." This was Samurai Nanjiroh! He didn't know the meaning of the words, "slow down." Which was probably why he ended up in the hospital.

Sometimes he hated his father. "It's your own fault," he said once. And immediately regretted it. Oyaji looked at him by moving his eyes, unable to move the rest of himself, and closed them in pain.

Kaa-san was convinced that it wasn't his fault. But it *was* all his fault. *Everything.*

"What time is he coming home tonight? I made some beef stew, and I thought he'd like it..." Days like these were every other, and Ryoma hoped for nothing more than a reprieve. Maybe a different set of parents.

So he hated hospitals.

He walked back up to the rooftop garden to see that the stars were out and the team had left without him. He didn't mind. It just meant that he would have to traverse the hospital alone. With a sigh, he walked back to the area of the hospital he knew Yukimura-fukubuchou would stay in so he could say goodbye for the day.

Seeing the name card by the door already holding Yukimura-senpai's name, although hastily scribbled, Ryoma paused. Should he say something? Their conversation on the platform had been interrupted after all. And wasn't he, as a member of the Rikkai tennis club, supposed to give him support? After all, he was familiar with the kind of depression that hit the patients.

So opened the door a little less than halfway, and would have opened it completely, had he not heard the voices. He could see the doctor and nurse conversing in front, with the boy's sleeping form looking away from them. He couldn't hear everything, but he could hear the important things. "Severe... incurable... tennis... impossible... poor boy." Ryoma had heard the same when the doctors were talking about his father. But Echizen Nanjiroh had given up on professional tennis years before the doctors were saying such things. Yukimura-fukubuchou was just getting started.

He backed away from the door as the nurse and doctor left the darkened room and ignored him as they left. Ryoma peeked in for a second and didn't move. Yukimura-fukubuchou was sitting up on his bed. Had he heard? He knocked on the wood of the door, but heard no answer.

"Yukimura-fukubuchou? I know you heard them," Ryoma said simply. There was no need for circumlocution.

"... do you need something, Echizen?" Yukimura-senpai still maintained his gentle demeanor, even in the face of such news.

"Just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"Come in, hm?" He didn't smile, but he didn't frown. Although the lighting was dim, Ryoma could tell that he looked perfectly composed as always.

He wondered what was going through Yukimura-senpai's head. "What is it? What's wrong with you?"

"... they think Guillain-Barre Syndrome, but it's not conclusive. I'll be discharged soon; it's nothing they need to keep me in a hospital for."

Ryoma nodded. He wasn't good in these situations, in which he had to comfort others. He was very much like a cat, and was only good for just *being* there. But he'd try to say something anyway. "Prove them wrong. They don't know you or your determination. Show them what the Rikkai spirit is about," Ryoma suggested even though he didn't believe or support the 'Rikkai spirit.' But Yukimura-fukubuchou believed in winning at all costs, and that kind of constitution didn't allow for failure, not even to an incurable disease. Ryoma figured that if anyone could fight off a disease it would be someone from Rikkai. They were as bullheaded as you could get.

"Thank you, Echizen. Why don't you go home now? Relax, and I'm sure you'll do well in the next ranking matches," Yukimura-fukubuchou said kindly. His eyes seemed to glow like ice in the moonlight and looked straight into Ryoma's. "Remember what I said. Be Rikkai's support. With me gone, there needs to be another great player ready to take my place. Now, more than ever." It was understood that he was essentially passing his title to Ryoma. It was a promise that if Ryoma helped Rikkai to the nationals, he would be

captain, above Kirihara. He would have all the power, and the harassment would be a problem of the past.

But that wasn't really the problem with Rikkaidai. "Get better soon," Ryoma said. He wasn't sure what to do, to say afterwards, so he slipped out, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Echizen," Kirihara said amiably upon seeing him. Ryoma turned to see his classmate leaning against a wall, photos in hand.

"Hanging out with Seigaku, huh?" Kirihara asked. He brandished the photos like a full house in poker, and Ryoma just raised an eyebrow.

"Yea, so what?" Ryoma hoped he looked calmer than he actually was, because he knew this could only be bad for him. He knew Kirihara was royally pissed that his ploy to get on the regular team failed, so the other boy's ire was higher than it had ever been.

"You poor bastard. And your poor bitch of a mother," Kirihara started. Ryoma was tempted to just punch him right there. He wasn't the impulsive sort, but no one was allowed to insult his kaa-san. He wanted to pull his fist back and let it fly into Kirihara's face. Instead, he turned his heel and walked away. He was not going to be suspended or expelled for violence toward Kirihara (never mind that no one had ever really been punished for the violence done to him). That was probably part of Kirihara's plan anyway.

"Literally! I heard Sanada-senpai had to save her job since she was such a crazy bitch."

Ryoma could only take so much. He twisted around and analyzed his enemy. The messy hair, the flaming eyes, the infuriatingly smug look on his face. The demon still had the photographs of him with the regulars, though thankfully, none of them were at the diner. "Stalker." Ryoma decided he would pulverize Kirihara on the tennis court. He wouldn't risk everything he had fought for just for a fleeting shot at

hurting Kirihara. The other boy was probably physically stronger than him anyway.

Ryoma had so much drive to fight, to play dynamically. He wished the ranking matches were now, because he knew he could drive Kirihara's face into the clay ground of the court. But they weren't until April, and he wasn't sure the fire would still be alive by then.

He walked away this time. Next time, he told himself, next time, he would meet Kirihara on the court and there would be hell to pay. Until then, he needed some fuel to keep his hate going. Something to keep him fighting.

Ryoma really didn't know why he was in this situation. Really? Didn't they ever practice? Or do homework? "No. I'm not going." He was not in the mood to hang out with them. Being seen hanging out with them was the worst idea ever.

"Ochibi-chan, please?" It was always Kikumaru who went down on one knee and asked with his arms wide open or performed some other humiliating gesture. Kikumaru didn't mind embarrassing Ryoma if it meant fun in the future.

"Just go, kid," his boss said, "They're pretty much the on'y customers we're gonna have today anyhow."

Ryoma just glared. His only excuse for not going was dashed. And his boss knew it because the smelly old man was grinning and waving goodbye as the Seigaku regulars dragged him away.

The arcade, for the Seigaku regulars, was only fun for the first few minutes of each game while Ryoma adjusted to the gaming platform. "Too bad, no regrets, better luck next week!" Kikumaru declared after he won a shooting game against the boy. Apparently, Ryoma had better luck a few minutes later and soundly beat him. After that, it was Ochibi: 8, Seigaku: 1. The shooting games, the DDR, the racing games, all were easy victories for Ryoma.

The sushi restaurant afterward made him nervous; since he'd been in Japan, he had only gone to one sushi place and it had quickly gotten expensive. His mother had embarrassedly emptied her wallet and apologized to Ryoma that they really couldn't have sushi until they'd gotten on their feet. Ryoma hadn't minded.

But he ate one piece. And another. And figured that since they invited him, they would pay. And he continued eating. He never realized how hungry he got until then.

"Why don't you eat more?" Taka-san asked. Ryoma really couldn't. He was completely full.

"How's the sushi, boys?" the sushi chef bellowed.

"It's great, Kawamura-san," Oishi responded with variations of praise echoing him.

"Oh? What about you young man? Eat some more, you've barely touched your sushi!" The chef let a tray of sushi land in right in front of Ryoma with a clatter.

"Aw, dad, don't make him if he's not hungry," Taka-san said reasonably. Ryoma hadn't realized that this was Taka's dad. Though he should have realized it. The resemblance was uncanny.

Gradually, the regulars had to leave one by one and Ryoma wondered what the purpose of the day was anyway. Fun? Was that all? Could he believe that they had dragged him from his place of work just for *fun* ? Eventually, it was only Tezuka, Ryoma, and Taka left. Though technically Taka-san didn't count since he was planning to stay there for the rest of the day.

"You," Tezuka said. It was strange. "Ochibi," he tried. Ryoma had never heard Tezuka call him by that nickname.

"Tezuka."

"Do you still want that match?" Ryoma wondered if the other boy could see how elated he was to hear those words. He'd heard what Tezuka was like. He heard about the stories his senpai told of the frightening freshman of last year, a boy with eyes like lightning hidden behind glasses to protect us mortal men. With the power to control the ball, even on his opponents' side. He was legendary. And Ryoma couldn't wait to play him.

He affected nonchalance and shrugged. "Why not?"

"... You played a match with him?" Oishi asked. He didn't know what Tezuka had been thinking. There was no way Ochibi had stood a chance.

"Yes. It was... refreshing," Tezuka answered. Oishi didn't understand. Their Ochibi apparently wasn't as little as they thought. Even after seeing the boy hold his own against four high school players at once, Tezuka hadn't expected this level of play. More than a month ago, they had all gone to the indoor courts expecting to see their rivals, Rikkaidai, but they hadn't expected to see the middle schoolers. They hadn't expected to see Ochibi battling it out against a number of high school freshmen and then go back to do some damage control with his fellow middle school seniors. But they had seen him soundly defeat the one causing trouble and bring peace and harmony the way only a leader could. Ochibi was an impressive tennis player.

"I had to use my full strength."

Oishi blinked a few times, unable to understand a reality in which the legendary Tezuka had to use all of his strength to play a middle school student. "But say you hadn't used your full strength. You still would have won... wouldn't you?"

Tezuka remained silent, and Oishi was sure what the answer was. He hadn't realized Ochibi was so talented. It seemed all of Seigaku

underestimated him. "Oishi," Tezuka suddenly said, "I'm going to have to visit the hospital for a little bit."

The game must have been intense; Tezuka's old injury had only started acting up that fall, and it was still giving him some trouble. Oishi wasn't sure what he was going to do with his friend. "You're too stubborn. What're you going to do if the damage to your elbow becomes too much?" Tezuka didn't answer, so Oishi pursued another worry he had. "Ochibi, he wasn't scared of you?"

Tezuka didn't answer. He was looking into the distance, his eyes focused on some strong memory of the recent past. "Tezuka, you listening?" Tezuka knew that Ochibi hadn't been afraid of him. There was something else, though. It had been a strange game, and although he thought he had pinpointed why, it was still bothering him. Ochibi had played a spectacular game. So spectacular that Tezuka wondered why he had never heard of him. The boy was only a senior in middle school. If so, they should have heard of him while they were still in Seigaku middle school. The boy had the potential to be better than Tezuka himself. And rather than being discouraged by that, Tezuka was energized.

Such talent, such a will to win! But that was the problem, wasn't it? "He... really wanted to win. There was something off about that. As if he wouldn't allow himself to lose, as if something terrible would happen if he lost." It had hurt Tezuka to defeat the boy. He appeared so stricken by the defeat, so angry with himself. It was just a game, Tezuka wanted to tell him.

"That is the Rikkaidai mentality," Oishi answered. Rikkai had been number one in Kantou for fifteen years running for a reason. They didn't allow failure.

"But that's not what he needs," Tezuka said, frustrated. He wasn't sure why he thought he knew what the boy needed, but he knew that the kid already had the drive to win. Focusing on that, and that only, would destroy his love for the game, if he had any at all.

Oishi seemed to understand. "You think he needs Seigaku."

The short verbal altercation with Kirihara hadn't been a one time thing. Nor was it restricted to Kirihara.

"Heard you needed some money, Echizen. Why don't you come with me and clean my house? Been looking for a suitable maid."

"Got new shoes, huh? What'd you do, steal 'em?"

"How's your mom doing? Saw her in the red light district and we had some fun. You have no idea how loud your mother-"

He had a detention for that. For punching the boy who said that. But the bastard hadn't gotten in trouble at all. After all, they were just *words*. Ryoma almost preferred the buckets of water and the punches. At least then he could just heal and get on with it. Hearing these words, he couldn't just send them out of his mind. They circulated, and once they seemed to be gone, they came back with vengeance to tangle his mind and weaken his will.

"They're not bullying you anymore, are they?" Yukimura-senpai asked once when Ryoma visited him. Yukimura was now a patient in Kanai General Hospital until further notice. Ryoma still hated the hospital environment, but he tolerated it just to see Yukimura-fukubuchou.

"... no. I'm fine. Have they found a cure? Or is it really Guillain-Barre?" Ryoma quickly changed the subject.

Yukimura-senpai sighed and sunk into his blankets until they reached his chin. "They're testing for every possible disease, syndrome, infection out there. But there's no cure for Guillain-Barre. No cure. I have an incurable disease. Which is why winning the Nationals is so important." Ryoma didn't think Yukimura-senpai was the type to fall into hysterics in a hard situation, but he also never knew his father to be a mature thinker before he was hospitalized.

He figured he could see who a person really was when said person was not only knocking, but was looking through the eyehole of Death's door. And Yukimura really wanted to win the Nationals.

"Yukimura-fukubuchou needs to calm down. After all, they haven't had conclusive tests." Ryoma didn't want to give him false hope, but he didn't want to let him fall into depression either.

"No, not yet."

Ryoma could hear the fatalism in his senpai's voice. It angered him. Ryoma hadn't given up; his dad hadn't given up, even in his last moments, Oyaji had been smiling and joking. Why was Yukimura-senpai being so weak? He was supposed to be strong, the backbone of Rikkai's tennis team.

He thought that Yukimura embodied the Rikkaidai spirit, but now he knew he'd been wrong. The spirit was to win at all costs. To risk everything for glory and be the ones on top, the ones who could claim they were the best. Ryoma, of all people, knew what the Rikkai spirit championed, and Yukimura was not living up to it.

"Rikkaidai doesn't need a captain who will just give up." Ryoma was tired, but he kept fighting. He expected at least that from the boy who would be his captain.

It was probably his imagination, he told himself-his imagination. Yukimura couldn't possibly rely so much on him taking up the captain's clipboard. It was years away. Years. "They'll have you," Ryoma thought he heard from his vice captain as he was closing the door behind him. He couldn't trust his ears; it must have been his imagination.

"*You*," Sanada-senpai growled. Ryoma wasn't sure why he was being growled at. And why all the regulars were openly glaring at him.

" *Me* ." He answered, not sure what they were doing or why they were surrounding him in the hospital's hallway.

"Don't be a smart-ass, Echizen," Niou hissed. Ryoma wasn't used to being in contention with the older regulars, and he wondered what he must have done now. Had they heard his harsh words with Yukimura?

It wasn't Kiriara or Sanada who suddenly grabbed his shirt and lifted him up. It was Marui Bunta. Marui Bunta, who was wrinkling his school uniform and searching him with his cloudy brown eyes. The fact that he wasn't chewing apple gum occurred to Ryoma first, and disturbed him more than the fact that his own feet weren't touching the ground.

"What did you tell them!" Marui demanded, shaking him.

"Sir! We do not tolerate violence in the hallways!" a nurse called him out angrily.

"Traitor," Marui spat, almost throwing Ryoma to the ground. He pulled his hands back and, palms out, held them defensively to show the nurse that he wasn't doing anything anymore.

Ryoma had no idea what was happening or why the Rikkai regulars were angry with him. How was he a traitor? What did he do?

"Don't look at us like that, Echizen," Sanada said, opening the door to Yukimura's room. "We don't tolerate that kind of thing in the regulars." The team filed in, most of them sending him one last *look* before entering the room.

Ryoma stood there, still confused, but unwilling to show his weakness. He'd find out sooner or later what crime they thought he had committed.

"Really, Echizen," a hateful voice whispered, "how could you tell Seigaku about Buchou's condition?"

That's what this was all about. "So did *you* tell Seigaku, Kiri-hara?" Ryoma asked, really wanting the truth. He wouldn't put it past the devil to do such a thing and pin it on Ryoma.

The demon looked truthful when his eyes flashed red and he simply said, "I would never betray Yukimura-buchou." And he swept into the hospital room. Ryoma wasn't sure what had just happened. Wasn't sure why his teammates would so easily believe Kiri-hara about Ryoma's apparent betrayal. Wasn't sure how Seigaku found out about Yukimura. Wasn't sure about much anymore.

Except that he needed to reconnect with the team he had never known. Was he spending too much time with the Seigaku regulars? Probably. They were too soft. If Ryoma wanted to win the nationals, he would have to survive until then. And to survive, he needed Sanada's protection. He didn't want to admit it, but Sanada was probably the only force stopping the people in his class from pushing him off of the highest building and finally being rid of him.

Tezuka couldn't protect him. Tezuka wasn't his buchou. Maybe now was the time Ryoma needed to start considering Rikkai his home. And to do that, he would have to completely scrap the Ryoma he used to be. If his match with Tezuka had taught him anything, it was that he needed to be stronger. He needed to be cutthroat and ambitious, just like Sanada-senpai and Yukimura. Just like them.

Next chapter: Echizen Ryoma vs. Ibu Shinji! Kantou Semifinals

Note: Next chapter is a pretty big time skip, so I hope you won't get confused. Thank you for reading!

Echizen Ryoma vs Ibu Shinji

Chapter Seven: Echizen Ryoma vs. Ibu Shinji

Ryoma hated Rikkai's colors. He lifted the front of his jacket with his thumb and forefinger. Black and yellow? What were they, Hufflepuffs? And the shirt wasn't any different, what with the gaudy stars lining his shoulders. He slipped off the jersey and wondered who picked the shirt in the first place. Did they do it to throw off the other teams? Or maybe the guy who designed it really liked bees.

He hadn't defeated Kirihara in the ranking matches. Then again, Kirihara hadn't won against him either. The April ranking matches were a complete waste of time, Ryoma thought. He wondered why he had battled so fiercely to be a regular when it still meant nothing. It just meant he got a free, hideously black and yellow jacket. Still no respect, still no acknowledgment. He didn't know why he thought getting a jersey would change anything.

Yukimura had been out of the hospital for only a short while, though on very strict orders not to play tennis, and everything seemed fine. Until he collapsed and had to return. Their captain had gotten to play one game in the Kantou Tournament before he was pulled out by his doctors and readmitted to the hospital. He hadn't been able to participate in the ranking matches, and Sanada, ever loyal, only wanted to fill seven spaces. But Yukimura had the final word as captain and declared that they should play intending to fill eight. Ryoma wondered if it was just so that neither Kirihara nor Ryoma would be denied membership in the regular team.

Word of Yukimura's condition spread quickly, but Yukimura was never told that the Rikkai regulars suspected Ryoma of being the leak. They didn't want to stress him out, not when he was recovering and healing. Ryoma was curious, though, because he wondered how Seigaku found out; he didn't want to ask, or else the other schools would know that Rikkai knew who was aware of Yukimura's

condition. Though once again he wondered why it mattered if someone knew that someone else knew about another team knowing-it was complicated and confusing, so Ryoma pushed it all to the back of his mind.

But this game thus far had been simple enough. Rikkai was dominating easily. Semifinals of the Kantou regional tournament, and they were already ahead by two against some unseeded team, Fudoumine.

Ryoma knew that Kirihara was pissed. Because Ryoma had third singles, he was guaranteed a match. Kirihara had been assigned second singles for most of the games, which meant that, if the regulars playing doubles were doing their jobs, he would never get to play. Ryoma wondered if someone was having mercy on him and decided that if Rikkai was going to be hell for him, at least he'd get to play a lot of tennis.

His opponent, Ibu Shinji, was good, but not good enough.

Good, but not good enough. A lot more to work on, still not yet...

A fleeting memory of those who used to utter those words, of a time when another great player-players?-uttered those words to him, brushed past his mind, but that time seemed like such a long time ago.

Rikkai didn't allow horseplay; only victory. Sitting on the bench, Ryoma took a moment to rest and forget. The game had barely started, and he was already tired. Not physically tired. Mentally tired. He wasn't sure if he wanted to keep playing anymore. Anyone else in Rikkai would be able to finish Fudoumine; he wasn't that important. He had half a mind to just lose and let Kirihara have some part in the glory. Then it would be Kirihara vs. Fudoumine's leader, Tachibana. Kirihara would win, and no harm done.

But he was a student in Rikkaidai, and that meant he could never allow himself to lose. Never, no, he told himself. He told himself that

he was supposed to be in the Rikkai mindset. He had to win, no matter what.

"I know what you're thinking, Echizen." Ryoma looked up at his vice captain who already sported worry lines. "If you lose, you're going to regret it," Sanada threatened him, handing him a towel. To an outside viewer, the gesture seemed friendly, empowering. The vice captain lowering himself to take care of his kouhai. Only those within Rikkai knew that Sanada was making sure that he kept his promise to Yukimura. And Ryoma would, he told himself. For Yukimura-buchou.

Sanada had a strange attachment, *or loyalty*, to the captain. Ryoma wasn't sure what kind of connection they had, but from what he saw, it was somewhat one-sided and not completely platonic. But Sanada seemed to live to make Yukimura happy, and victory was the only thing that would make the captain happy.

So Sanada clapped a hand on Ryoma's back in a strong movement that would seem, to the viewer, to be a show of support. But it was a warning, a reminder of how strong a single hand from Sanada could be. Ryoma had to win.

"Blessed. He's in good form now and his senpai are taking care of him. Oh, he's going to lose." Sometimes Ibu Shinji accidentally said his thoughts aloud. He was never sure because his thoughts always ran together. Why don't I get nice senpai? What great divine power decided that Echizen Ryoma deserved good senpai, and not Ibu Shinji? "He's too lucky, making me a little frustrated." A little frustrated? A lot frustrated. And the freshman thought he could just do whatever he wanted? Well, Shinji was just as good and even better. "An eye for an eye, Echizen." He wasn't planning to hold back. He would unleash his 'spot' without mercy.

"You know you can't forfeit," Sanada said stoically. Ryoma knew Rikkai's maxim well. Losing is not permitted. Must win. Even if it kills

you.

"I know, Sanada-fukubuchou," he responded. Not like he'd quit. But he would have liked to know that his teammates cared more about his wellbeing than his tennis. The cotton on his eye was irritating, but he could deal with it well enough. The blood had made him nervous for a short while, but he quickly realized that Yanagi-senpai's hands were cut-free. No need to worry about that. There would be no mixing.

"It'll only hold for fifteen minutes. He'll have to forfeit once the fifteen minutes are up," the referee said neutrally.

Ryoma turned to his vice captain, because it was obvious that the older boy wanted to say something. "Then finish this in fifteen minutes. Kirihara could have won the entire match in fourteen." Why does it always come back to Kirihara? "Do you want to be on the regular team when we face Rokkaku or Seigaku?" Sanada seemed to pause and laughed dryly as he glanced down at Ryoma. "Well, Seigaku will be easy to beat..." Ryoma froze. Were they really playing Seigaku next?

"You shouldn't underestimate Seigaku," he just said. He stood up and was about to start off for his place on the court when someone put a hand on his shoulder.

"We won't." It was a warm hand. For some reason, he always imagined that the hands of those in Rikkaidai would only ever be cold toward him. He looked up at the boy who caught him. "So don't underestimate that injury." Surprisingly, it was Yanagi who had spoken. Yanagi, who at the moment looked uncomfortable saying anything to him, as if speaking to him were a criminal offense. Ryoma had said less than ten words to him since he had arrived at Rikkai. "I'd say that ten minutes is the most. If you go beyond that, it might be dangerous. Rikkai can spare a loss, but we cannot spare you." Yanagi finished confidently and walked away.

Ryoma wasn't sure what to think about Yanagi's words. Even if they were just practical words and said only for the sake of the team and not solely for Ryoma-or were they?-those words were still the most caring he'd heard from anyone on the team apart from Yukimura. It was a start, he thought. Maybe he'd be able to warm up to Rikkai. But first, he couldn't lose.

Ibu Shinji wondered if his initial thoughts about the team were wrong. Had their captain just sent the kid, who looked like he should've been a freshman, back onto the court, seeming to care little about the cut on his eye? It had bled a lot. Shinji wondered if the captain was really as uncaring as he seemed or if it was just a stoic front put on to ease the worries of the other players. It must be the latter. After what I'd seen earlier, the team was close. Even those not on the regular team seemed close.

"Hey, it's only a scratch," the other boy said as if it were really only a scratch. 'Only a scratch' didn't bleed nearly that much. "What I want to know is... what trick was that?"

The boy was inquisitive. Shinji could have told him the biology behind the muscle contractions, why the impact of returning a top spin after bottom spin after top spin over and over could cause temporary paralysis. I could have told him about the training I had gone through to be able to spot the optimal time to strike. Like now! Shinji hit the ball in easy reach and smirked when Echizen wasn't able to hit it back.

I could feel it, see it, the muscles contracting. Echizen would be sore tomorrow.

Shinji had heard the referee. Echizen only had fifteen minutes before he had to forfeit the game. Shinji could always just play an endurance match, drag the time out. But that felt so cowardly.

You think you're all that, Echizen? I could make you lose without really trying, and you're over there sweating and working like your

life depends on this game. "Not bad, you're attracting a lot of sympathy." You're probably good at that since you're small. And you have big eyes.

"Sorry to interrupt, but can you stop your mumbling? I only have eight minutes left."

Mumbling? Was I mumbling again? I thought I was just thinking. The kid was tough. "You're pretty tough," he echoed aloud for the boy's benefit.

"I found that you have two weaknesses," his opponent suddenly said. And he switched hands. In normal people, switching hands would be impossible because of the lack of ambidexterity and because it would take far too long to toss the racket to another hand. But Echizen was quick. And he had good reflexes. But I was better. I had to be for the sake of Fudoumine.

That was stupid, Shinji thought as the boy tossed the racket back and forth between hands. Annoying guy with this both hands bullshit. I would ruin both of his arms then. Echizen was asking for it. I hit another slice and belatedly realized something important. Echizen was hitting the tennis ball toward my body-it was impossible to hit a topspin with it coming straight. So he was smarter than I had given him credit for.

"Hey, where's your topspin?" Echizen taunted him. Shinji wasn't sure if he should be mad or not. The boy was playing so impressively that he was just glad to play such a good and serious player.

Of course, if Tachibana-buchou had been playing this match... he would have won for Fudomine no matter what. But that wasn't decided by him.

"Rikkai Dai Fuzoku wins! 3-0!"

He walked up to the other player. It was just common courtesy, really. "Sorry I hurt your eye," he apologized. But he wondered. The

boy was sneaky. I couldn't have done it. It wasn't me at all. "But I know it wasn't my fault, because you must have done it on purpose, you bastard." Of course, you're good at garnering sympathy.

"Shinji," Tachibana-buchou chided him.

"Sorry," Shinji said in his strange way. Was he mumbling again?

Word quickly spread about the frightening second year ace from Rikkai. Initially, tennis teams ignored the warning, since they had heard of the Devil Kirihara the year before.

"It's not Kirihara," Inui announced, "They say he's better than Kirihara." They were at the diner again, discussing strategy for their next match. Against Rikkaidai.

"Then who?" Kaidoh asked him. He remembered how quickly Kirihara had disposed of their captain last year, and if there were rumors of an unbeatable second year, then surely it was Kirihara. If this second year was so good, he must have been on the team last year. Rikkai's captain the year before, Nishiki, hadn't been very good anyway; they could all tell that he was just filling space that would have gone to the freshman, had he been as frightening as Kirihara.

"Reports say this one is much shorter than Kirihara. Moreover, this boy, Echizen Ryoma, has already gained a 'title'. You know how Rikkai loves their nicknames."

Oishi nodded. "Yes, I remember. The Emperor, the Child of God, the Three Demons, it's kind of hard to forget," he joked. Well it was true; it was part of their campaign for power. Having the titles separated them from the plebeian players. Having a popular title, like the Golden Pair, or Tensai empowered players like Kikumaru, Oishi, and Fuji, and gave them the advantage over unnamed rivals.

"Well, since Yukimura is out of commission, Rikkai needed a new trump card. They say he's just like Sanada, the Emperor," Inui told

them, "He dominates on the court, and allows no defeat, just like you'd expect from Rikkai. The Prince."

"What about Ochibi?" Fuji suddenly asked, "Isn't he on the team?"

Inui seemed to be a bit jarred, nervous. "Well, there remains the fact that we don't actually know his name, so determining whether he is on the team is a bit complicated."

"Maybe he knows this second year kid. This kid beat Ginka's Doumouto. He *pulverized* him," Momo said seriously. It was so rare to see him serious that they knew to be concerned. He wasn't trying to detract from the conversation about Ochibi; he was just concerned about this second year ace.

"Yes," Inui agreed, "He defeated him with ease in less than ten minutes. Devil Kirihara didn't even get to play. Then a 6-0 game against Nashikari's third year captain, Shinagawa. And then a 6-2 defeat over Fudoumine's Ibu Shinji."

"What?" Taka asked, surprised. Fudoumine had been almost impossible to beat in the Tokyo Prefecturals, and he couldn't see how a mere second year could best any of Fudoumine's singles players. He remembered Ishida's hadoukyu, Ibu Shinji's spot, and Kamio's speed. They had been incredible opponents.

"Well, we'll be playing against them in the Kantou finals," Fuji said. "I wish Tezuka were here, but maybe we'll see Ochibi there. Wouldn't that be great?" He had really warmed up to the boy. It was kind of sad how they hadn't been able to visit the diner as much because of tennis practices. But whenever they went to the diner, Ochibi was there. Usually. It seemed today was an exception, because Minato had been the one to take their order. Though lately, 'lately' as in the past few months, Ochibi seemed to distance himself. He had been more taciturn and irritated.

"Don't you think it's about time we ask Ochibi his name?"

Of course, it was a question that lingered on the edge of all their minds. A name clung to the edges of their minds, a name that began with an *R*, they thought. They had heard his mother calling him by name only once, but it escaped all of them. They all wanted to know his name, but didn't want to push the issue. Ochibi was like a wild animal, like a timid wildcat. Not like a lion or the large African lions, they thought. Like a small cat, with the golden eyes, who runs away at the first sign of danger to himself but defends his territory with a fierce spirit. Like a rabbit, Kikumaru thought, but then he imagined that Ochibi wouldn't like being compared to a rabbit.

Must win

Losing is not permitted

It had been drilled into them. They had to win. For Yukimura-buchou.

Ryoma had told his boss at the diner that he had to take a week off. He'd told him that the Kantou finals were up, and he had to practice. And to not tell those loud obnoxious boys anything.

The real reason why he couldn't work that week, he knew but would never say, was that he couldn't see them again, the eight, and still keep a strong grip on his mission-to win. He had talked little to them, and basically tried to avoid spending too much time in their company. If he basked in their joyful presence too long, Ryoma didn't think he would have the constitution to leave them.

But individuals didn't matter. Echizen Ryoma didn't matter. What mattered was winning Kantou for the sixteenth time and Nationals for the third year in a row. He had been close to losing against Ibu Shinji. If he hadn't caught on to what Ibu was doing...

Ryoma didn't want to think about that. He walked into the tennis store just as it was ready to close. He needed new grip tape, and easily decided to get the best kind, even though it was more expensive. He hoped the gift card he'd gotten for Christmas-he

refused to think of the people who had gifted it to him-still had funds on it; he didn't want to check, to see how little he would have left. He'd rather be denied once the card ran out and have that over with than check his funds after every purchase. But he didn't need much anyway. Just enough to buy his grip tape.

"Echizen-kun," an airy voice floated over to him. Ryoma turned and saw that guy from Fudoumine. Hm.

He nodded in response and took his grip tape to the cash register. He thought he saw Ibu Shinji glare at him. "How's your eye?" Ibu asked. Well, he didn't sound vengeful. Actually, he sounded a bit concerned. Ryoma glanced over at him and could immediately tell that the other boy's mind was flying fast. He seemed to think a lot and sometimes accidentally said his thoughts aloud.

"Still healing," Ryoma answered curtly. The cashier rang his purchase up. 800 yen. He slipped out the gift card which somehow still had funds even though it was already July. Ryoma had used it for everything since December, from tennis balls to strings to clothes, anything that this tennis store sold. He wondered how it hadn't run out yet. Did he really want to know how much was left? It would just be one short inquiry, and then he'd never have to ask again. Just once.

Curious, he asked, "Is there a way to see how much is left? On the gift card?"

"Sure," the man behind the register said. He asked for the receipt and showed where it read " *[Card: 6000 yen]* "

"What?" Ryoma wondered. So much left! Even more curious, he asked, "How much was there initially?" He hadn't cared the first time he used the card. He didn't want to think about how limited his resources were. But not this time.

"Let's see," the man muttered, turning to a computer on the same desk. "Here, you can see how much there was and what was spent

each time, and stuff like that." He turned the monitor around for Ryoma to see and he was amazed.

"You keep putting funds into that card, Echizen-kun?" Ibu Shinji asked him, staring at the screen without decorum. Ryoma hadn't. He didn't even know it was possible. He looked at the dates and the money, and realized that after every purchase, the amount on the card increased a week or two later.

"So it only had 3000 yen at first... I wonder why you kept adding money to it when you could just buy it with cash. Though I guess..."

Ryoma tuned him out. He could handle only so much of the boy's muttering before he had to stop listening. "Thank you," he told the cashier.

Now he couldn't *not* think of the Seigaku regulars. Even now, they were taking care of him. Even now when he was trying to block them out. Did they know about his financial problems? It was embarrassing, he thought. *Humiliating*, even. But they hadn't mentioned it. And Ryoma doubted they would ever mention it. And frankly, as long as no one ever acknowledged it verbally, he would let himself appreciate the gift. Of course, he'd stop using it-Echizen Ryoma was not a charity case-but he wouldn't chew them out for it. Maybe someday he'd have words with them, when he was no longer in Rikkaidai and they weren't in Seigaku.

"That Echizen. I hope he wins," Ibu Shinji muttered to himself, watching the other boy leave the store. "No," he amended, "I hope he has a good match."

They would be ready for anything, the Seigaku regulars thought. Inui had thoroughly researched every single one of the players in Rikkaidai's tennis club, even a few who weren't regulars. Inui had their statistics, their likes and dislikes, and even their favorite colors. The only thing he didn't have were referential pictures. He never needed pictures, he thought, because having an image only led to

assumptions and misconceptions based on physical appearance. And he found that physical appearance was often misleading.

"Their doubles are nationally ranked," Inui warned them. "Their doubles team easily beat Fudoumine's Ishida-Sakurai pair, 6-0. But that's probably not who you're playing," he was telling Oishi and Kikumaru, "They have many players who are brilliant with both singles and doubles, so their lineup will be a surprise. They will almost certainly have the Trickster for doubles, though he is the one player I have absolutely no data on."

He turned to Fuji. "Also, there's that mystery second year, Echizen." Ryuzaki Sumire tried not to show her shock. How strange. Echizen wasn't a common name. Inui continued, "We put you in singles 2, probably against Kirihara. Watch out. If everything goes well, we'll be going into the Nationals as the Kantou champions. If not, we'll still get to go to the Nationals. But we'll be challengers."

It chilled them to the bone. That they were going to the Nationals again, no matter what. It was a good chill.

"Okay, let's win!" was all Oishi needed to say. Seigaku was fired up and ready. A bottomless fountain of hope and energy. Even though Tezuka was gone for rehabilitation, Seigaku believed they could do it. The first doubles pair stepped onto the court with no little cheering.

Coach Ryuzaki contemplated the wisdom behind letting Kaidoh and Momoshiro play doubles. Sure, they spurred each other on, but there needed to be a connection; mutual hatred was hardly good enough.

But, she thought, she had sensed a change in her team. They were all closer, she observed. They left tennis practice together, to do God knows what, and then discussed whatever it was over laps. She'd heard their conversations before, about someone or something named Ochibi. Probably a pet, from the way they spoke about whether he was eating enough or whether he seemed happy lately.

Looking onto the tennis court, she knew that Momoshiro and Kaidoh were not strong enough. They had the drive and the ambition, but the Rikkai players seemed to be able to play doubles with any other Rikkai player flawlessly. Not like Seigaku. They had the Golden Pair, yes, but then the rest were a mixture of singles players who could step into the shoes for doubles. But only for a little while.

And Momoshiro and Kaidoh couldn't do it.

6-1, and Jackal Kuwahara and Marui Bunta hadn't taken their wrist weights off until the very end. It was a strong battle, they all knew, but Momoshiro and Kaidoh had formed a strategy too late and it cost them the match.

So Seigaku collected themselves and only cheered harder once the Golden Pair stepped onto the court. They were convinced that the pair would redeem Seigaku. The pair that had defeated so many others could surely defeat any doubles team Rikkai patched together.

But against Niou and Yagyu, it wasn't enough. They had switched identities. A parlor trick, some thought, but it had worked to unnerve their opponents. 6-4. The Golden Pair had played excellently, magnificently, but it wasn't enough. They had evolved during the game, *but*, they all thought, *it wasn't enough* .

So Seigaku clutched the little hope they had left as Inui took his place on the tennis court.

Slowly, the little hope grew and withered and grew as the game progressed, following the progress of the players. To normal onlookers, it seemed like just a high-energy game. To the experienced players, they all saw some kind of nostalgia within their shared play. Two halves of what used to be the leading doubles team playing against the other.

Inui was playing evenly against one of the Three Demons, Yanagi Renji. And then finally... hope. For Seigaku, the win was a glorious

surprise, a victory that roused even the most spiritless to stand in appreciation. Even in the end, as they faced each other, victor and conquered, it was obvious the two were friends. Some wondered how such a friendship could exist; the data tennis players from both schools.

"Game set won by Inui!"

And Seigaku had hope again.

However, a team had never taken a loss so hard. The Seigaku regulars watched the Rikkai team as they looked somberly at each other, talking in low, hushed tones. The word 'surgery' seemed to pop up more than once.

"Rikkai's captain is apparently having his surgery today. That's why they've been trying to beat us as fast as possible-to make it to their buchou's surgery." Inui related the story of Yukimura to the Seigaku freshmen, a trio who were in the tennis club but weren't experienced enough to be regulars. "Even though Rikkaidai does not have the leader of the Three Demons, it seems they have only strengthened their commitment to victory."

It went unspoken on Seigaku's side. They had all heard the law of Rikkai. "Losing is not permitted."

They could hear the words spoken from Rikkai's vice captain to Yanagi, the only *loser* Rikkai had had so far. "This was not a match you were unable to win," he started. He was cold-looking, harsh, angry. "You let personal feelings get in the way."

And Yanagi seemed to understand. "I'm sorry," he said with a voice flooding with sincerity, "I broke our promise to Seiichi." Onlookers who hadn't heard Inui wondered who Seiichi was. Yanagi seemed to tauten, to sweat now more than he had during the match. "Do what you must; set an example for the other players."

The older Seigaku regulars knew what was coming next, having seen it years before. Some didn't, and were taken by surprise by the grand motion of Sanada's sweeping arm. A strong hand coming so fast that most would have missed it, were it not caught in that essential second.

The backhand was stopped inches away from Yanagi's cheek which was turned away in anticipation of the pain. The only thing stopping its course was a bright red racket held by a boy none had expected.

He lowered the racket passively, pushing Sanada's hand down. In what seemed to be an arrogant move, he tossed his racket back over his shoulder and deadpan, said, "It's no big deal, right?" He walked past his fukubuchou and looked straight at the eight boys of Seigaku who held the boy's gaze with confusion.

He glanced at Sanada and then fixed his eyes on his next opponent. Fuji. "The result will be the same. Rikkai will win another National title, and we'll make it to Yukimura-buchou's surgery on time."

Disbelieving whispers of "*Ochibi...*" floated on the air from the Seigaku regulars. There was no mistake; the stature, the face, the white cap being lowered over foggy golden eyes..

"Echizen-kun," Fuji said coolly, "If you're pressed for time, I'll be happy to oblige." All of Seigaku missed the boy's eyes closing in resignation and his drooping shoulders. All they saw was a cocky kid who thought he could take on Seigaku's Tensai. They didn't see how the boy lost the shine in his eyes or how he looked at Fuji with the conviction of an abandoned child. No, they just saw Echizen Ryoma, the Prince of Rikkaidai.

Next chapter: Echizen Ryoma vs. Fuji Shusuke! Kantou Finals

Echizen Ryoma vs Fuji Shusuke

Chapter Eight: Echizen Ryoma vs Fuji Shusuke

Inui was uneasy about the match. For one, no one had expected to see Ochibi on the court. He knew that Fuji had been most concerned about how they hadn't heard a thing about Ochibi. Echizen. And now he was probably feeling the most betrayed. But Fuji wouldn't let it get to his head, Inui knew. He would play to the best of his ability, personal ties set aside.

"Ochibi..." Kikumarū whispered. Oishi heard him, knew what he was feeling. They felt as if something had been stolen from them, as if they had been deceived by him. But really, had they? The regulars had just made assumptions, and Ochibi, ever careful, failed to correct them.

"I thought..." Oishi started to realize something horrible, "I thought he was only having problems with high schoolers, people he wouldn't see on a regular basis." But the feeling of Ochibi's betrayal toward them was heavily outweighed by the feeling that they had unwittingly betrayed *him* by not doing enough. Not looking into it, not being more persistent.

Kikumarū understood. He had to bite down on his bottom lip to stop the trembling. "O-Ochibi, we should've done more." The grave thought haunted all their minds, that the boy who had become their little brother had suffered at the hands of people on his own tennis team, not just random high schoolers. They thought the problems had subsided once he entered high school, once he stopped coming in hunched over or tired. But Ochibi had been pulling away quietly, and he otherwise seemed fine. They hadn't wanted to push.

Any negative thought directed toward Ochibi was quickly wiped away by concern. Seigaku wasn't the type to hold a grudge, especially not against Ochibi. It seemed that Fuji was the only one who could

confront him as Echizen Ryoma. He was the only one among them who could play against him without feeling compassion for Ochibi.

"He looks so different," Momoshiro muttered. They couldn't be loud. They couldn't cheer. Either way, whether Fuji or Ochibi won, they would feel the intense sense of loss. They knew what a loss for Rikkaidai could do to the boy.

Kaidoh nodded in agreement. Their Ochibi standing on the court, bedecked in Rikkai colors. It hadn't bothered him in the abstract, but seeing it now... it just didn't feel right.

"He looks too serious," Taka said worriedly. Even in the diner, the boy had never looked so serious and set. So cold and detached. Even in the diner, he had a shine in his eyes and a strong persevering spirit.

"He has been serious lately," Inui reminded them. Serious, quiet, withdrawn... Inui couldn't read the boy's closed expression, but it was one he had never seen before.

On the court, Fuji appeared to be faring much better. He was up to serve. The ball seemed to hover in mid-air as it left Fuji's fingers. Suspended in time and taking eternity to reach the edge of gravity before time caught up, the ball, propelled by Fuji's racket, finally zipped over to Echizen's side.

Fuji did not *just* have the IQ. He also had the analytic skills worthy of the title, Tensai. And he could tell how much Echizen wanted to attack the net and wouldn't give him the chance. He kept the ball going.

But Ochibi was fast, and Fuji finally remembered that Ochibi was fast. He was approaching the net despite Fuji's efforts to stop him. He knew in his mind that Echizen was using some kind of single-footed split step, something he'd heard Devil Kirihara used.

And it was an excited parry, and Fuji let his eyes open to the match he was having. And who his opponent was. Fuji knew they were both now testing each other out. Ochibi had heard about Fuji's counters in the diner. Fuji had even detailed the physics behind them. But Fuji had the personal information about Ochibi. Fuji knew his secrets and personality and had Inui's data fresh in his mind. This was really interesting, Fuji thought, as he won the first game.

Echizen's service game was equally fun. Echizen probably didn't realize it, but Fuji was greatly intrigued. The shorter boy was playing with vigor, but a kind of desperate play. It was like a fish out of water, struggling and struggling until it killed itself. Or like the Japanese soldiers of WWII, who told themselves that it was better to die with honor than to survive with a loss. It was a longer battle, because Fuji wouldn't give, but Echizen clearly had this point and the next point. He was driven by something, and that something didn't seem to be good or healthy.

"2-1!"

As Echizen played, Fuji fought back, deciding not to give an inch. This was Ochibi, he told himself. And Ochibi deserved the best tennis Fuji could play. Perhaps it was Fuji's frustratingly constant smile, or maybe it was Fuji's start of a different kind of playing style. Either way, Ochibi's suicidal drive seemed to abate, gradually replaced by curiosity.

It became exciting, powerful tennis. They were speaking a silent language, challenging each other on the court. Ochibi was much faster than Fuji remembered, but he never let himself underestimate the younger boy.

And it was fun. Challenging each other, pushing each other to unknown heights, all in one match. Fuji was playing to the best of his ability, a gift he allowed for few, and it seemed Ochibi was doing the same. Unlike the other Rikkai players, he hadn't even come to the courts with wrist weights on, and he had used his left hand from the very beginning.

And Fuji had to wonder what the boy was thinking when he suddenly used a smash, knowing what Fuji's counters were. He did not hesitate in his Higuma Otoshi. Perfectly executed, it used the force of the smash and sent the ball to Echizen's baseline.

When he stood and looked straight at the boy, however, Ochibi was not cowed as many would be. There were his golden eyes, shining with the kind of excitement he hadn't seen in a long while.

They got started once again, and once again, Ochibi tried to use a smash. Higuma Otoshi. And the smash was canceled.

"I see," Ochibi said with an impish smile, "You can make my smash absolutely useless." Here was Ochibi, Fuji thought. The boy was challenging him, trying to find a way to beat the second counter. Fuji knew he was playing to get Seigaku to the Nationals, but he couldn't help thinking, 'Alright... how about you try to defeat it?'

So when he lobbed the ball as his own challenge, he didn't feel like he was betraying Seigaku. He was playing tennis against a *very* interesting opponent.

Ochibi, responding, smashed it. A twisting smash, a strange smash that Fuji had never witnessed. He didn't let it disturb him, and the ball was returned, sent flying over Echizen's head, hitting the baseline perfectly. Ochibi kept trying, but all it did was earn Fuji another game.

As they changed court, Fuji wondered aloud for Echizen's sake, "I really can't go easy on you, huh?" Ochibi didn't answer, but Fuji had his response as the boy smashed another purposeful lob sent from Fuji. Only to have it sent back much too simply. Fuji played fiercely, as did Echizen, but as the other boy was setting up to smash, Fuji thought he saw a trick of the imagination.

He hit a ball that clipped the net?

Who hits the net on a smash? Surely not Echizen, the fearsome Prince of Rikkai. No, Fuji knew that Ochibi was up to something. But he used his Higuma Otoshi on the smash anyway.

"Out!" Out? Fuji wondered. He had never hit the Higuma Otoshi out. Never. He smiled as he realized what Ochibi had been doing.

The game continued, but Fuji wanted to see it again. How Echizen had found a way around the second of his three counters. He lobbed it, and as he saw Echizen getting ready to smash, he heard the smug voice say, "You don't need to give me any more lobs." And did Fuji know it. Even as he tried using the Higuma Otoshi, he knew it wouldn't work. Out.

Ochibi, innovative Ochibi, had found a way around his counter. Hitting the ball against the top of the net, changing the trajectory, that was almost pure genius. How could Fuji position his racket perfectly when the path of the ball was unpredictable? With practice, he could figure it out, but not today. It would take days, weeks, to understand it and counter it.

Echizen was truly a formidable player.

He was having fun! It was almost like seeing Oyaji play in himself, and Ryoma thought he was that much closer to reaching the level of almost supernatural play his old man had used. Fuji was perfectly accommodating too, he laughed to himself. Two good friends, he thought, playing a fiercely competitive battle on the courts. Completely oblivious to the darkening sky and their teams' shouts.

What more could he want?

As if there were some divine being who really didn't like him, the sky started to water. The rain was light, but enough to cause concern. The ref called for a short break to see whether they should continue the game today or tomorrow. Reaching a decision, he ordered people to start covering the courts, making them waterproof until the

rain subsided. They were hoping to finish the game today. To have their winner. Ryoma remembered, as if it had been pushed to the back of his brain to rot, that he was playing in the finals of the Kantou Tournament. For Rikkai Daigaku Fuzoku.

He watched in mourning as Fuji was enthusiastically welcomed back to the Seigaku fold, amidst cheers and happiness. But when he turned to see his own side, all he saw was anger.

Niou and Marui were bent over a cell phone, trying to hear the speakerphone at the same time. Jackal was holding his watch in his hand, as if just looking at his wrist would be too passive for him. He clenched the timepiece in his fist and turned to Sanada, who turned to Ryoma. And then looked away with disdain.

"Rikkai! Find some shelter until the drizzle subsides!" The Rikkaidai regulars quickly obeyed, ushering the others along to the main building not too far away, leaving Sanada, Ryoma, and everyone else behind. The referee found it to be a good idea, since the tennis association didn't want to be liable for any accidents on account of the rain, and spread the order to all of the spectators in their court. Other referees could make decisions for their own court, Ryoma supposed.

He watched the Seigaku regulars move as one large group into the building, even as the rain was starting to lighten a bit.

"Echizen," Sanada started, ripping him away from his thoughts, "Yukimura's surgery started thirty minutes ago."

Had it really been that long? He'd been enjoying himself far too much to remember the time-

"What the hell are you doing out there!"

Ryoma's head snapped up. "I-"

"You started out well, Echizen, I'll give you that. You've done everything *right* up till now. District tournament, Kantou *up till now* . There's a reason you were usually singles 3. So you'd get the experience, and now that you're up against one of *them*, you start losing?"

Was he losing? Ryoma glanced over at the scoreboard, shocked and pleasantly surprised to see it 2-3, Fuji in the lead. He hadn't anticipated doing that well against Fuji. And he hadn't realized how long it took to get those two measly games and keep Fuji from getting more.

"Echizen!"

Ryoma had to remember to focus. Sanada didn't like it when people didn't do what he expected. "Now that Rikkai has started to put some faith in you, you just let go like that? You'd rather let Seigaku win?" No, Ryoma thought desperately, he wasn't allowing Fuji to win! He would admit that it looked that way, what with his constant smashes, but really, he was just... playing.

"Dammit Echizen," Sanada sounded genuinely stressed. "You've broken your promise to Yukimura." Ryoma couldn't help but think that if anyone deserved the Hufflepuff colors, it was Sanada. The man was loyal to a fault.

"... I'm sorry," Ryoma said, surprised at himself. When was the last time he apologized to anyone? Sincerely?

"Apologies are worthless. Echizen, you cannot lose," Sanada hissed, "it is not permitted at Rikkaidai. You need to remember that. Do you think you can remember that on the court?"

Ryoma just nodded. He wondered if that would be the end of that, since the sprinkle had stopped and the sun was already out. The game would resume, and Ryoma had to win. He was so close to being a real valued part of his team. He was so close, he thought, so close.

"But I think you need a reminder," Sanada interrupted his thoughts. He should have expected it. He was on the losing course and didn't care. Of course Sanada was going to take the situation into his own hands. Hand. But that didn't stop Ryoma from flinching.

Something was different, Fuji thought as they stepped onto the dry court. He looked over at Echizen, a boy who most certainly looked nothing like Ochibi in that moment. He was set, determined, but not in a good way. Fuji wondered where this Echizen had come from.

"I have somewhere to be," Echizen said, lowering his hat.

"Then I'll defeat you quickly," Fuji challenged. To his bemusement, Echizen didn't smirk or smile. He was blank.

Quickly, Fuji realized just how much Echizen wanted to win. Was desperate for that win. He marveled at the change in him and wondered what happened during the break to change him so. He dodged a near hit to his head and still managed to send the tennis ball back. It was almost as if Echizen were trying to *hit* him.

He was trying to hit him! Fuji decided when he was almost hit again. Fuji returned the next ball after quickly getting out of its way. He looked to Echizen's side, but couldn't see his face, as it was shadowed under the brim of his cap. Was Echizen so caught at the end of his rope that he saw incapacitating Fuji as the only way to end the game?

Fuji had the chance to smash, but as he hovered in midair, he could see Ochibi. Crouching, protecting himself from the hit. *Expecting* to be hit. And it startled him.

Then, like some kind of perverted miracle, Fuji lobbed the ball. It was an impossible move from where he was. A stupid, impossible move because he had softened for the split second it took to hit the ball incorrectly before he landed. As Echizen jumped to smash, he didn't look like he was aiming to hit a cord ball this time. He was aiming to

hit . Like what he had expected Fuji to do. Usually, players smashed the ball away from their opponents to make it harder to reach. But Echizen didn't. He looked coldly down upon the ever smiling genius and forsook all connections he used to have with him.

...

He had tried to get out of the way, to use the Higuma Otoshi, but it hadn't happened. No, Fuji realized, and found himself with his back on the hard ground and suffocating air around him.

The dust settled, and thankfully he'd had his eyes closed. "Are you alright, Fuji?" Coach Ryuzaki's voice asked him. Fuji shakily stood up, dusting himself off.

"Yes, I'm fine. Let's just continue-" He opened his eyes.

"That brat," Ryuzaki said, incensed, sorrowfully, "was aiming for your body on purpose and-Fuji, what's wrong?"

He couldn't see. When the ball hit his head... had it affected his eyes somehow? He felt absolutely fine. A tennis ball couldn't do too much damage. However, if it had stolen his eyesight... how hard had he really been hit? Serves could get as high as 200 mph, but what about smashes?

Ryuzaki escorted him off the court away from the rest of Seigaku to discuss his options. She, along with some help from Oishi, checked his eyes, unfocused as they were. "Your pupils are the same size, and nothing else seems to be amiss," Ryuzaki said.

"And you're walking well. No nausea?" Oishi asked him.

"No," Fuji responded hesitantly, "I just can't... everything's one giant shade of gray." More confidently, he said, "I do *not* have a concussion, Oishi." Fuji knew what a concussion felt like.

"Well, it's your choice whether you get back on there. I would rather you forfeit the game-" Fuji sent an intense glare at Ryuzaki, coach or not. "-but I figure you wouldn't. Okay, but be careful, Fuji."

He nodded his appreciation and moved back onto the court. The cheering students from Seigaku had no idea what was wrong with Fuji; they just knew that he was back and ready to play.

However, blind, he could only do so much. Much too soon, the score was 4-3, Echizen in the lead. Fuji couldn't get past it; he could theoretically play using his ears and his instincts, but they could only go so far. He couldn't even get to the ball.

"What's wrong, Fuji-kun?" Echizen asked with malice. It was strange, to hear such a harsh voice from the boy he had come to know as Ochibi. It angered him. What happened to him? He closed his eyes in frustration. After all, they were no use to him open, and the black was much more comforting than the blank grayness.

Echizen served without concern for Fuji, and the ball bounced up toward Fuji's face. He knew it well by now, so hitting it back was not a problem.

A hush, followed by a long "oooooooooh," told him that he had gained a point. "15-15!" Echizen hadn't expected him to hit it back.

"A fluke," he heard from the other side of the court, a low mutter. Hm, Fuji thought, maybe his hearing was also getting better as they played. Because Echizen served again and Fuji was able to send it back. He heard it coming to his side of the court. He knew where it was.

"15-30!" Fuji swore he could hear growling from Echizen's side. Fuji wouldn't let it be a fluke. He continued playing, relying on his counters to get him through until they were 4-5, Fuji leading. Fuji had hit his stride.

This was it, Ryoma thought. He would lose. He thought he hadn't stood a chance against Fuji in a normal match, and they needed to *leave*. They needed to support Yukimura. They needed to win. So he hadn't hesitated once Sanada let him loose on the tennis court. He knew now how useful Kirihera's tennis could be, how quickly it could end a match. So he used it.

So firmly in the Rikkaidai mindset, Ryoma played how he knew he was supposed to have played from the very beginning: ruthlessly. But it had blinded Fuji. Fuji Shusuke, the first Seigaku regular he had ever been introduced to. The smiling yet blunt genius who sincerely cared about him. But Ryoma had pissed it all away to pursue victory.

He had frozen in place as Fuji walked off the court with an older woman, their coach. She had glanced at him, too. A probing glance, and one that held such hurt. How had Ryoma hurt her? He didn't even know her! He knew he had really hurt Fuji, but once the tensai stepped back onto the court, Ryoma was reminded of why he needed to win.

Yukimura was very much like Fuji, Ryoma was starting to see. Yukimura was more manipulative than Oishi could ever be. He was just like Fuji, with an honest face but a deceptive soul. Fuji, Fuji was deceptive, but playful, impish. Yukimura wanted to win, Ryoma thought, and he would do anything with his influence to get it.

But the boy's eyes had become unfocused, unseeing. Ryoma had blinded Fuji Shusuke. The sightless eyes seemed to smother him, and Ryoma found himself gasping at the horrifying person. A memory of another blind tennis player flashed in his head, and Ryoma had to take a calming breath to remind himself of where he was. Standing on the tennis court. Not in the hospital. Not by his bedside. Not watching him die.

He couldn't let such a thing bother him, though. What would Yukimura say if he lost to a blind opponent? Ryoma didn't want to hear his captain's disappointed voice.

The game was starting to go his way. He had shoved the relentless memory to the back of his brain with harsh words aimed toward his opponent, but then something about Fuji changed.

"A fluke," he muttered to himself once he realized that Fuji had actually managed to return the ball. A blind Fuji. But it wasn't a fluke, he knew, as Fuji earned point after point.

Match point? Already? But it was, Ryoma realized. He couldn't lose. No, he couldn't lose! 4-5, with a blind genius in the lead... he couldn't lose! Was this all he could do? Had Ryoma finally reached his limit, and found a better player?

No!

He would not lose. He had only one thought on his mind, and that was *losing is not permitted*. His mind felt like it was a million light-years away, and only his body played. He saw Fuji setting up for a smash, but this time, his body moved without him consciously telling it to. Higuma Otoshi, he distantly recalled as Ryoma performed the technique.

He'd done this before, he remembered, in the match against Kiri-hara. Except this time, he had a broader repertoire. He had moves from Marui and Jackal, letting the ball run across the top of the net before falling and a boomerang snake that zoomed through the referee's chair. Even Kiri-hara's knuckle serve was used against Fuji. As were all three of Fuji's own counters. Ryoma had watched players, and he had soaked in their techniques without meaning to. But now, he unleashed everything.

Ryoma pushed himself, because *he needed to win*. Because for some reason, Rikkai was entrusting the Kantou finals to him. And even though he held no particular love for the school, he was still part of a team.

And he needed to define his loyalties. And in the end, it was Sanada's ground smash that ripped through Fuji's gut and secured

victory.

"7-5! Echizen!"

Like a zombie, Ryoma walked over to the net. His eyes stared at the sweaty hand. Fuji's. Fuji was still offering him that hand. Ryoma's eyes gradually rose until they locked onto Fuji's own hazy, unfocused blues. He felt his stomach overturn itself when he realized, ' *I did that.* ' But his guilt seemed to grow tenfold when he saw that Fuji was still smiling, and that he had closed his eyes, like the gates of Mars in times of peace.

And Ryoma felt that he was relieved. Fuji didn't hate him, for neglecting to tell them that he would be playing against them, for injuring Fuji... if Fuji hadn't moved at the last second as he had, Ryoma was sure he would have lost that eye. The ball would have hit his eye socket perfectly and with more than enough force, and Ryoma didn't know what he would have done if that had happened. He shivered and looked back up at Fuji, who was so accepting and forgiving that it sickened him.

So he held out his own hand, intending to shake Fuji's and then apologize. He had his right mind now, and he knew that had he been in Fuji's place, he would have done the gesture out of courtesy and stalked off. But Fuji, Fuji Shusuke, simply smiled and graciously sought reconciliation. Even though it had been Ryoma's fault.

Fuji's hand was still there. Ryoma finally took it, and the relief that poured into him was so overwhelming, that he felt that he didn't have to win anymore. He could just rest.

"Ochibi!" shouted a few players from Seigaku as they rushed onto the court. It was a strange but obvious message when none from the Rikkai team had done the same.

Limp as a soggy noodle, Echizen Ryoma was snoring lightly in Fuji's arms. It was a good thing that his vision was starting to return and that his reflexes were quick enough to catch the boy. "He's just

sleeping," Fuji said with his usual smile. It didn't seem strained. It didn't seem like the smile of a player who had just lost the Kantou Finals for his team. The Seigaku population commiserated with him, but Fuji knew he had played a good game. He had never lost before. Ever. But, Fuji thought, if he had to lose, he was glad it was against Ochibi.

Though his vision was still a bit foggy, Fuji looked down at the boy in his arms and almost cooed at the cherubic painting he was seeing. Except, well, for *that*, Fuji thought as soon as Ochibi woke at Sanada's command.

"Echizen, wake up," Sanada ordered the sleeping boy. The boy blinked and practically jumped out of Fuji's arms.

"That match! What happened? Why are we still here?"

"You won, Ochibi," Fuji answered, trying to maintain his calm. Fury rose within him at seeing the boy's face. The redness couldn't be hidden from this close up, and the mark told Fuji exactly what had happened.

"Yukimura's waiting," Sanada said, already walking away. Ryoma obediently followed after him, stumbling as much as his pride would allow. Fuji could tell the boy was exhausted. He had tapped into something amazing, something incredible during their match, and it had been so draining that the boy could barely walk now.

"Took you long enough to beat him," a member of the Rikkai team sneered. Fuji recognized him immediately. Kirihara. Kirihara, one of those boys at the indoor tennis courts. Ochibi seemed to glare at him but continued walking. Fuji was ready to chase after him, to do *something*.

"Fuji, let's go," Oishi said, tugging on his shoulder. Fuji wasn't sure why he couldn't let himself go after Ochibi and why he couldn't go with Oishi. He watched the boy dressed in Rikkai gold follow after the others, a child among demons.

Next chapter: Enter Kaidoh, Yagyu, and Niou

Enter Kaidoh, Yagyu, and Niou

Chapter Nine: Enter Kaidoh, Yagyu, and Niou

"Sanada hit him."

The defeated Seigaku regulars looked to their tensai. "What do you mean, Fuji?" Kikumaru asked, foregoing the usual affectionate 'Fujiko-chan.'

Fuji shook his head, his brow creased and his menacing blue eyes open. "Sanada *hit* him."

"Why do you think that?" Taka asked. He couldn't really understand how Fuji made conclusions sometimes. The boy made complete leaps in logic that only made sense once Fuji explained step by step.

Fuji paused. "His playing style completely changed after the break." And another great detail was left unsaid.

"I noticed that too, actually," Oishi commented. *He* had not missed a thing. Standing the closest, he too had seen the angry red imprint on Ochibi-Echizen's right cheek. He had made sure the rest of the regulars hadn't invaded the boy's privacy too much. He didn't think Ochibi would appreciate the team knowing about that. But apparently Fuji thought otherwise, or perhaps thought it was better that the team know.

The award ceremony had been fine but awkward. Third place went to Fudoumine, which surprised many but not the Seigaku regulars. They had fought valiantly against Fudoumine earlier in the Tokyo Prefectural Tournament, and knew how good the unseeded team was.

Second went to Seigaku, and Oishi received the trophy in place of Tezuka. It wasn't bad; last year, they had gotten fourth at the Kantou Tournament. This was an improvement. Of course they wish they

had won, but they were capable of looking to the future. The Seigaku team didn't treat it as a loss; it was still a victory, because they had another shot at the Nationals. And they would train and train to win.

First place went to Rikkaidai, but in an unprecedented turn of events, Rikkaidai was nowhere to be found.

"Rikkaidai Fuzoku? Rikkai Daigaku Fuzoku from Kanagawa, please come forward..."

Instead of the team, a lone boy stepped up to receive the first place trophy. He looked up from under his white cap. "The team had to go support our captain. I'm receiving the trophy in his place."

"O-Okay, and Tournament Champions, Rikkaidai!" the announcer blared over the loudspeaker, answered by a long silence as Echizen Ryoma walked to the platform, took the trophy and stepped back onto the tennis court where all the other teams were standing in line. Half-hearted applause sounded through the empty air. It looked weird, the Seigaku regulars thought, and kind of sad, how Ochibi had the Rikkaidai line all to himself.

Fourth and fifth place were announced, Rokkaku being one of them to go on to the Nationals.

Kikumarū didn't wait a second after they were all dismissed before he pounced on Ochibi. "What're you doing for the rest of summer, Echizen-kuuuuuun?" Kikumarū asked, bouncing over to him.

Ryoma wondered how the boy could be so cheerful when his team just lost. Even Fuji didn't look too beat up about it. In fact, he remembered falling into Fuji right after their match. If it had been anyone from Rikkai who'd lost, Ryoma doubted he'd have all his limbs attached.

"Working. Training," Ryoma answered. It had been a year since he came to Japan, and he didn't know why he ever thought things

would get better. "And working. And training," he continued, monotone. He was just tired. So very tired.

"Come with us," Kaidoh suddenly said.

Ryoma raised an eyebrow. He thought eagerly, to where? But reason tempered his voice and instead said aloud, "What?"

Kaidoh blushed, and Ryoma was amazed at how red the boy easily got. Momo stepped in. "We're going on a short vacation to the beach, just a short training camp. In Chiba." Chiba? Ryoma wondered.

"Yeah, join us!" Kikumarū said enthusiastically, "It's less than an hour away from Tokyo, and three days on the beach will do you some good!"

Three days? Everything they said made him more uneasy by the second. First, in Chiba. He supposed if he went there in the morning he could technically be back in time for his shift at the diner...

"Yes, he'll be back by Tuesday at the very latest. Send my regards to your boss, Minato-san."

Ryoma glared at Fuji. The boy did not just call his place of work. He did *not* just call them. "What did you just do, Fuji Shusuke?"

The genius just smiled and snapped his cell phone closed. "You're on a short paid vacation," Fuji merely said.

"I don't have paid vacation!" Ryoma answered, exasperated. Their antics were going to lose him his job!

"Now you do," Fuji said with finality. "Your boss is surprisingly malleable."

Breathing heavily, he arrived at the hospital a little more than an hour after his teammates had. Yukimura's surgery had been almost finished when the team got there, so Ryoma hadn't missed much. Everyone was standing and sitting by the door of the post anesthesia care unit, anxiously awaiting their leader.

"You won," Yanagi stated.

"M-hm," Ryoma answered, unsure of what he was supposed to say. After all, they had all been there.

"It didn't seem like you were going to, Echizen," Marui said warily, chewing his gum slowly, as if he found the taste curious. Ryoma hoped he was feeling guilty for manhandling him a few months ago. He personally had not retaliated only because the third years were not involved in his war against Kirihara in any way. They were bystanders, and Ryoma would rather not pull them in.

Kirihara was squatting against the wall with his lanky arms draped over his knees. He glared at Ryoma. "Probably didn't want to play against your friend, huh?" The other regulars tensed up, and Ryoma knew that they were all thinking it. They all thought that he had 'gone easy' on Fuji because they had some kind of camaraderie.

But he couldn't deny it. He remembered stepping onto the court, dedicated to winning. But somewhere along the way, he had started having fun. He shook his head violently. That was his problem. He had lost sight of his goal.

"We'll resume practice next week. For now, relax," Sanada ordered. He glanced at Ryoma. "You took a while to get here." Well, the Seigaku regulars wouldn't let him leave. He had never met a team composed of such gracious losers. And it was hot outside.

"... I walked."

Jackal blinked at him. "You did *not* walk." Incredulity.

"Fine, I ran."

It seemed the Rikkai players weren't sure how to respond. Ryoma didn't get it. They should have realized that he had gotten there somehow. After all, he didn't own a car and he didn't have a rail pass. Or money for a rail pass. Or money for a taxi.

He knew what they would have said if he had gotten a ride here from the Seigaku regulars. Kirihara would use it as more proof of Ryoma's disloyalty, and everyone else would assume the same. So he hadn't taken any chances. Of course, running the way to the hospital after the draining game with Fuji was probably too much. Whatever had happened, whatever had coursed through him, cost him a lot of energy. He sat by the door. It was okay if he closed his eyes for a few minutes, right? Yeah, a few minutes...

"We might as well go to the lobby. Yukimura-buchou won't be coming out until the anesthesia wears off," Yagyuu said, already stalking off. Sanada and Yanagi both unhappily agreed and they all started toward the soft couches in the waiting area.

"Sleeping again, Echizen?" Niou teased, bending down and looking at the boy. He really was exhausted, Niou thought as he looked at the kid's hunched form. He wondered what happened to his face; his cheek was kind of red, in the shape of-

"Really, Sanada? Did you have to?" he whispered to himself. It looked like it might bruise.

He heard footsteps behind him but didn't move. "Would you really pull a trick on him while he's sleeping, Niou? He looks like he needs his rest." Niou stood up and faced Yagyuu. He couldn't see behind his friend's glasses to his eyes. Yagyuu always held an air of mystery, even when they weren't impersonating each other. Niou knew that Yagyuu's words weren't Yagyuu's thoughts. They knew each other better than that, and Niou knew that his friend suspected nothing foul from him. At the moment.

"We're all trying hard for Yukimura-buchou. Even him. It seems, especially him." Niou wasn't sure what he was trying to express by telling Yagyu. He remembered calling the boy a smart-ass though Echizen had been everything but. Echizen visited Buchou more than Sanada did.

His thoughts were muddled on this topic; maybe he thought that they should help him more. Maybe he thought that their blind loyalty toward their captain was destroying this young boy who was just as dedicated to Yukimura as they were. But Echizen couldn't be, Niou thought, because he wasn't *there* in middle school with them, and he knew nothing.

Yagyu just gave a limited nod and glanced down at the sleeping boy. "Then give him a blanket." There was a linen cart nearby only for patient rooms, but it wasn't like Niou ever followed the rules anyway.

Niou wasn't sure how he felt about that response. It seemed that was the extent of Yagyu's good will. Niou wondered when he had become so transparent; had he said he wanted to do something nice for the boy? He didn't think so. He watched his friend walk away, and he figured he could do one better. It was a pillow with a blanket on top, and they were sitting beside the boy in case he woke and needed it. He would go no further.

"Got it!"

Ryoma quickly moved to the side to let his partner take the ball. He didn't know why he was with *Kaidoh* of all people. Everyone collectively agreed that they didn't want a pair from the same team for beach volleyball, which meant that Ryoma had to be with someone from Seigaku (since some guy, Shudou, from Rokkaku was stupid enough to drink one of Inui's concoctions. Even Ryoma knew not to do something so foolish). And no one from Rokkaku wanted to pair up with Kaidoh. Big surprise.

"It's yours!" Kaidoh shouted.

God, no, Ryoma thought. He put his hands together in what he imagined was the correct form for volleyball and awkwardly hit it. At the net.

Faced with Kaidoh's glare, Ryoma could only say, "What? I've never played volleyball before." Not the manliest sport in California, he remembered, and he never occupied himself with playing sports on the sand.

By some miracle, Kikumaru decided he'd had enough of volleyball rules and chose instead to drink the Iwashu Mizu, Inui's newest. Well, it was an automatic win for Kaidoh and Ryoma. He watched the other matches, interested in how their tennis techniques translated to beach volleyball of all things. He smiled as he saw Fuji return a spike with his Higuma Otoshi. Fuji seemed to have a good connection with his teammate, unlike Ryoma.

He glanced at Kaidoh who was glaring, or maybe just watching, the matches proceed. Ryoma wondered if Kaidoh really wanted to be here at all. He didn't seem the type to enjoy these kind of games. Oh, that was unfortunate, Ryoma thought as he saw Oishi and a freshman from Rokkaku obliterated by the elderly coaches and had to drink Inui's experimental juice. Even Fuji and that guy Saeki fell victim to Coach Ryuzaki and the old man. More humiliating than the losses were the punishments, and he wasn't thinking of the drink. Ryoma had no idea what compelled these old people to sit on the losers. What was the point?

Worse than that, Ryoma face-palmed, was Inui's desperation and subsequent embarrassment. He didn't want to think about it, he shivered.

The game degenerated into a zombie free-for-all, what with the losers crawling toward the old lady and the old man and just acting like the undead as seen on television. Ryoma should have been annoyed. After all, wasn't this supposed to be training? All they were

doing was playing beach volleyball, and although he could see the physical advantages in trying another sport, there were absolutely zero benefits in pretending to be the decaying undead. But he wasn't annoyed.

And he played along anyway, as did Kaidoh.

"She's a seal point Himalayan," Ryoma whispered proudly, stroking her back. He felt like he had been neglecting the poor cat. He always made sure she was fed, but he only ever spent time with Karupin while they slept.

Kaidoh seemed hesitant to talk about *cats* of all things, but responded anyway, keeping his voice low. "I used to have a cat. Siamese. His name was Mao."

"You named your cat, *cat* ." Ryoma repeated in a hushed tone for his own sake. Mao was the Chinese word for cat, wasn't it? Or maybe just the sound cats made?

"Yeah, so what?" Kaidoh muttered defensively. Ryoma laughed quietly, making sure not to wake anyone else.

"It's just funny."

"Fshuuuu..."

Ryoma wasn't sure what that hiss meant, whether Kaidoh was really pissed or just making the sound because it was second nature to him now. The hiss died into silence, and Ryoma wondered if everyone else was truly asleep. Karupin was sleeping now, curled up on top of Ryoma's blanket. After all, it was summer.

Kikumaru wasn't even on his futon anymore, having folded it as he hugged the thing in his sleep. People were spread out every which way, some half off of their blankets, and some sleeping ramrod

straight. He himself had his hands folded on top of his blanket, thinking.

He had pulled out every excuse not to go to this training camp (vacation), even though he dearly wanted to. He had merely gone home and ignored his desire to follow them. But the next day, the regulars came to his door even though they were supposed to be in Chiba. He had claimed that he had work (Fuji took care of that), that he had homework (Fuji also took care of that), and he even said he couldn't leave Karupin or his mother. And surprisingly enough, Fuji took care of that as well.

His mother was sleeping peacefully in another room with Ryuzaki. They had a common bond or something. During the day, they had exchanged secret glances and smiled sadly at each other. Ryoma had no idea what it meant. His mother spent the day enjoying the merry sun and watching the boys play. Kaa-san didn't seem to mind that Ryoma had never explicitly stated that the boys weren't from Rikkaidai. She did look inquiringly at him, but she never voiced her questions. She just seemed happy that he was happy.

So that was how he found himself that night in Chiba, sleeping alongside Seigaku and Rokkaku. After all, what Fuji wanted, Fuji got.

It seemed that Seigaku lived by that rule, and Ryoma was starting to see why. Fuji was charismatic, in a quiet sort of way. And he was frightening. Terribly frightening.

Not so much in beach volleyball. Fuji teamed up with Saeki Kojiro from Rokkaku. He hadn't met Rokkaku personally before this trip, but all seemed lively, just like the players of Seigaku. They didn't compete; they played. Well, until they saw what was on the line-until this point, Ryoma had no idea how much power Inui, of all people, held over the rest of his teammates, especially if he had a glass of strangely colored muck in hand.

"You might want to keep an eye on your captain," Kaidoh suddenly said under his breath in the darkness. Ryoma shifted over to look at

him, and though it was dark, could see that Kaidoh's eyes were very much open.

Ryoma wondered if that was a threat or something. "Any reason why?" If they dared threaten Yukimura...

"Fuji's out for his blood."

Ah, yes, Ryoma thought. He heard stories about Fuji and his vindictiveness. "But Yukimura hasn't done anything to merit Fuji's ire," he said fiercely, quietly. Ryoma knew Fuji, and knew that Fuji had a reason for everything. More often than not, his reasons were unpredictable, but there always was at least one good reason.

"Yukimura? No, Sanada. That bastard."

Ryoma didn't have to ask why. He had seen the mark on his cheek, and, to him, it looked much worse than it actually was. It wasn't even really bruising; just a little purpling. "Can barely feel it now," he said. He wasn't sure why he was defending Sanada-fukubuchou. For some reason, he felt that there was something more behind Sanada's actions.

"You're kidding me," Kaidoh hissed, incredulous. "It's been more than a whole day, and I can still see it." It didn't seem strange to Ryoma that Kaidoh was sitting up right next to him. His eyes glowed in the weak moonlight, and Ryoma knew that Kaidoh was indignant. On Ryoma's behalf.

"He could have hit harder," Ryoma whispered back. He glanced at Kaidoh's doubting face and continued, "The hit that he would have delivered to Yanagi-senpai, the hit that I stopped with my racket, was much more forceful than the one I received." Once again, Ryoma wondered why he was defending Sanada at all. "And I wouldn't have won if he hadn't snapped me back to reality."

"Snap you back!"

Karupin yowled and seemed to glare at Kaidoh.

"Shhh!" someone across the room hissed wearily.

"Snap you back to reality, really?" Kaidoh shout-whispered.

Ryoma nodded. He didn't think Kaidoh would understand. "We needed to win for Yukimura-buchou. We were all planning to be there when he went into the operating room, but my match took too long. And if I had lost... we couldn't have gone to Yukimura-buchou with a loss. Especially Sanada-fukubuchou. He's been Yukimura-buchou's best friend for years now. He couldn't allow a loss, not when Yukimura-buchou needs as much encouragement as possible to get better. And Yukimura-buchou has been the only person who has consistently helped me." Ryoma had actually recited this in his head many times. He knew, logically, why Sanada felt he had no other option. If Ryoma were the type to pity his aggressors, he would have said it was kind of sad how devoted and unwavering Sanada-senpai was in regards to Yukimura.

"It's just like Tezuka-buchou," Kaidoh sibilated in understanding.

Ryoma knew that it was nothing like their Tezuka-buchou. Their Buchou wasn't the type to give up or the type to value victory over everything else. Their Buchou cared about them; Yukimura, in his best state of mind, only thought of winning and in his current state of mind, had given up. Though Tezuka was stoic, silent, tall, and unsmiling, he cared. Did Sanada-senpai care? He cared about winning. For Yukimura. He cared about Yukimura. He wished Sanada could be more like their captain. Yes, they were both strong and reserved, but what if Sanada cared more about the rest of the team? What if he was more like Tezuka-buchou?

"Just like Tezuka-buchou," Ryoma echoed, already half asleep.

Kaidoh wasn't about to tell the rest of the regulars where he was. He knew that Kikumarū had phoned two different radio stations and

even tried to pay an exorbitant amount to ticket brokers to be where Kaidoh was standing now. In fact, he thought as he peeked out of the stadium, there was Kikumaru right now, looking to buy a ticket from any last minute scalpers around. But the stadium was well and truly sold out.

"Didja hear?" a loud, obnoxious boy was telling his friend, "Rikkaidai thinks they're so cool. Can you believe they didn't even bother going to the closing ceremony?"

"What arrogant assholes!" the other boy responded. Kaidoh couldn't help but agree.

"And they sent some kid to get their trophy-a regular, even! I bet he's no good, just a fill in since their captain's out of commission." But Kaidoh couldn't abide by that too easily. He kept his seat only because it would be stupid to get riled up over other peoples' conversations, even if they were jerks. And they'd get their comeuppance at the National Tournament when their asses were kicked by Seigaku or Rikkai.

"Yeah, their captain had some disease and wasn't even there."

"Better for us!" One boy said, "I hope," with a hint of malice and the tact of a pebble, "I hope his disease only gets worse."

Now this, Kaidoh couldn't tolerate. He personally didn't know Yukimura, but from what he'd heard, the guy was pretty nice. And he was apparently the only person at Rikkaidai who ever attempted to help Ochibi. Echizen. Whatever.

He stood from his seat and punched the offender. A good, solid punch to the eye. Looking the fallen redhead up and down, Kaidoh concluded that he was a tennis player from another school. Probably from another district, even. He probably should have assessed the situation before he acted; after all, there were four of them and one of him.

"What, are you from Rikkai? Well, bring it on, dude!" the redhead said, standing up and rushing toward him. Kaidoh welcomed the invitation, pulling his fist back for another punch. Another boy in a regular jersey grabbed his punch and actually *flipped* him onto his back.

"Didn't you hear my friend? Bring it on," he hissed. Kaidoh quickly got up, not sure what his plan of action was going to be once he was face to face, but deciding he really *would* lower himself to kick the other guy in the balls. But he didn't get the opportunity, because he had to dodge a quick punch and then another.

Footsteps. "Stop this at once." All of them turned to see a familiar face.

"Y-Yagyuu Hiroshi, from R-rikkaidai!" one of the boys without a regular jersey stuttered. Yagyuu Hiroshi, by the nickname of the Gentleman.

The boy had glasses that obscured his eyes, but they weren't nearly as thick as Inui's. He was even wearing his school uniform-not a tennis uniform-his school tie and pants. He pushed his glasses up and scanned the boys. "You're from Murigaoka. From the Toukai district. Do you all want to be suspended from the National Tournament?" It was possible, Kaidoh knew. Bad behavior could lose a whole team's spot at the Tournament.

"He," Yagyuu said with a nod in Kaidoh's direction, "is not from Rikkai. He's on the Seigaku team. In any case, this should all be dealt with outside."

"S'okay," the redhead responded airily. Kaidoh was only suspicious. No one was that forgiving; at least, this guy couldn't be. "How 'bout we settle this with a tennis match?" He had a predatory glint in his eye, and Kaidoh knew something was up.

Yeah, Kaidoh thought, that was what the other boy wanted. But Kaidoh wasn't stupid, and neither was Yagyuu. "Sure," Yagyuu

answered them. The Gentleman had a plan, and Kaidoh was curious.

"Echizen's Seigaku buddies... they're not that bad," Yagyu said, taking his seat.

Niou glanced at his doubles partner. "Is that what took you so long?"

Yagyu nodded. "Sorry I forgot the drinks. I didn't want to miss the match, and I had to sneak back into the stadium after a game against some idiots."

Niou shrugged. "So, whose laser beam was better? Mine or his?"

Yagyu's mouth twitched in a quick, fleeting smile. "Kaidoh Kaoru's laser beam was actually not too bad for a first try. Faster than your first attempt."

Niou scoffed. "Pfft. Is he alone?"

Yagyu nodded. "Seems so. He... defended Yukimura-buchou."

Niou smirked. "Seems little Echizen's had some influence on our enemies." Yagyu mentally agreed. It went unspoken but understood. Everything was done for the greater glory of Rikkaidai, and Echizen could be useful. But, he wavered, did he want to take advantage of the friendships Echizen had made? He doubted Niou wanted to. He was a trickster, but not a malicious one.

They looked out at the stadium, imagining themselves on the court with a strong, victorious captain holding up their third and, for the seniors, final, flag of the Nationals. They would leave behind a three-year legacy, and if anything happened, at least they'd be immortalized in stone and paper. They would do anything to see Yukimura-buchou standing proud and triumphant.

Sometimes he wasn't sure he existed. In times like these, when he found himself on the roof of Rikkaidai and looking at the clouds. But he could see the world, and he could feel the wind lightly playing at his hair. He could hear the silence of the school since it was summer and school wasn't technically in session. And the low conversations of the tennis team as they left for the day. He knew there was a world out there, and he knew that he knew. So did that mean he existed? In knowing that he knew the world, did he know himself?

"What're you doing up here, Echizen?"

Ryoma didn't bother to move. "What about you, Niou-senpai?" Ryoma thought he'd be the only one up here; the school roof wasn't easily accessible during the summer.

"I always hang out on this roof."

"You also always listen to jazz, but that doesn't tell me *why*," Ryoma responded without taking his eyes off of the abstract white shapes in the sky. It was like soup, he thought, with clear, blue water.

"Why not?" Niou nudged him, sitting cross-legged beside him. It seemed Niou wasn't bothered by the fact that Ryoma knew what kind of music he listened to.

Ryoma just shrugged.

"You know," Niou started, "when Kirihara entered Rikkai Middle School, he called himself a 'super rookie.' Even then, he was obsessed with being number one. I was wondering, with your arrogance and talent, why weren't you like that?" Ryoma wasn't sure why Niou of all people was telling him this. Ryoma wasn't going to tell him a thing. Not about tennis, not about his life, and not about Echizen Nanjirou.

The white-haired boy didn't bother to look at Ryoma. "He quickly beat Nishiki and the other third years. Already, he was calling himself number one. But then the Three Demons arrived. Y'know, Yukimura-

buchou with his jersey draped over his shoulders like a cape, and Sanada and Yanagi on either side. Like the mafia."

Ryoma snickered. The image hadn't changed. Yukimura always wore his jacket like that, with his arms crossed; maybe he had a fear of sleeves, Ryoma joked to himself.

"The little brat," he continued fondly, "was defeated soundly by the Three, one right after the other. When he lost, he lashed out, even when Marui and Jackal tried to comfort him. They found him sulking at an arcade. In a way, they saved him. He trained on his own, working until exhaustion, and then challenged the Three again. That was the first time Rikkai saw Kirihara's bloodshot eyes and knuckle serve-but he still lost." Niou paused here, but Ryoma didn't move his eyes from the sky.

"In Rikkai, we grow from our mistakes and losses. We grow stronger from the pain and work harder. You have no idea how many times Kirihara has challenged them and lost. They even helped him develop the kind of tennis he has now. They worked with him, never sparing his feelings, because he thrived on criticism and challenges. They, we, took care of him." Niou glanced at Ryoma from the corner of his eye, and seemed to pause, maybe to think.

"He's the Echizen Ryoma to our Seigaku."

Ryoma didn't bother looking back at Niou. There was something strange. Why did Niou feel the need to talk to him now? A whole year went by in which the seniors did nothing to help *him*. What, did their care only extend to Kirihara? Did they not have the capacity to pay attention to, or even include, another kohai? There must have been something else, some other reason for why Rikkai seemed to hate him. It couldn't have been just because he wasn't Kirihara. There must be another reason, another excuse so that he'd have a chance at being one of them.

"That's not the truth," Ryoma simply said. He wasn't sure how much of what his senpai said was true or how much was false, but he

knew that this was Niou he was conversing with. And Niou was the Trickster.

"Aw, ya got me, Echizen!" Niou stood up and put his hands behind his head. Ryoma did look up this time, if only to observe Niou's reaction. He looked... not quite distracted, but something close to it.

"Word of warning, though. Rikkai loves the Child of God more than anyone else on the team, even Kirihara. And Yukimura-buchou knows it."

Ryoma wasn't sure if he was interpreting this correctly. What was the warning? Not to get on Yukimura's bad side? But he was pretty sure that Yukimura didn't have a bad side. Well, there was that one time with Nishiki, but Ryoma was nothing like Nishiki. Ryoma wasn't fond of having a headache, and so stood up to leave before Niou could say anything more.

"Oh, and be careful going out. Take the right staircase. The rails of the staircase on the left are all vaselined by yours truly."

Ryoma nodded and opened the door to the stairs. When he got to the split staircases however, he made his way to the staircase on the right and raised an eyebrow at the uncommonly shiny rails and smirked. He tested the railing and felt the slick petroleum jelly. He continued down that staircase despite that, figuring he had never bothered using the rails before anyway. While he was walking the way down, he wondered: had Niou told him that last-minute lie because he was out to trick him, or because he needed to keep his reputation as the Trickster intact?

Ryoma didn't know what to believe about anything, and figured this confusion was the real talent of Rikkai's Trickster.

Next chapter: Enter Yukimura, Marui, and Jackal or Echizen Ryoma vs. Yukimura

Enter Sanada, Marui and Jackal

Chapter Ten: Enter Yukimura, Marui, and Jackal / Echizen Ryoma vs. Yukimura

"Muga no Kyouichi," Yukimura muttered. "The State of No-Self. The losing of oneself to experiences." He turned to Sanada without rising from his bed. "You say he used it?" Yukimura was excited, Sanada could tell. To think! Having two players who had reached the penultimate goal of tennis. He looked at his bed-ridden friend, knowing Rikkai would be an unstoppable force.

Sanada nodded. "Definitely. He was using moves that, frankly, shouldn't have been possible with his body type. Moves that I know he's never practiced. He used my smash, Kirihara's knuckle serve, and even Fuji Shusuke's three counters."

Yukimura smiled. "He's great, isn't he? It didn't take much to get him to tap into it." Yukimura had told him that Echizen had potential. Sanada remembered seeing his best friend's smile glow with anticipation for the new kid, and like that, the brat had replaced Sanada in Yukimura's eyes.

Sanada looked uneasy. "He was playing around a bit. He gave up a few games to Fuji Shusuke because Echizen wanted to test him. During the Kantou Tournament!" Sanada huffed angrily. He couldn't believe how stupid the junior had been. Even though Rikkai was the best, they couldn't afford two losses in a row. It would kill morale and only encourage the enemy to do better. But he had to tell Yukimura what it had taken to get him to tap into it.

"I had to... you know." Sanada wasn't proud of what he had to do. It was the standard operating procedure, though. It had been that way since he had been the vice captain of the Rikkai Middle School team. If he made an exception for Echizen, then that would only let the boy think he was receiving preferential treatment.

"I understand, Sanada-kun. In this case, it seemed to have helped. Maybe he's more like Kirihara than we expected. To think, he harnessed the Muga... you haven't even done that, have you?" It was a subtle dig, one that Sanada had heard before. His 'Fuu Rin Ka Zan' wasn't good enough. Not for Seiichi.

He hadn't reached the Pinnacle of Mastery, the ability that only Yukimura and Chitose Senri had possessed-and now it seemed, Echizen Ryoma. Sanada had heard of the research Chitose had done: some bundle theory, as if the self never existed as such; the self was always just a collection, a bundle of experiences and memories. And Echizen Ryoma could harness it, could open the first door.

"It feels that he isn't quite a part of the team, though. We need to make sure that he really is on Rikkaidai's side," Yukimura suggested. Sanada felt a heaviness drop into the room at Yukimura-buchou's decision. He listened to Seiichi because he'd do anything for his best friend. But he did Yukimura's will because he was part of Rikkaidai.

"I heard you were at the Seigaku-Rokkaku training camp," was the first thing Yukimura said to him. He was sitting up in bed, weak but doing his best to get stronger. Ryoma wasn't sure how he was supposed to answer.

"... yes."

Yukimura didn't look angry. In fact, he looked downright delighted. "Then you spent a lot of time with them? Had fun?"

Ryoma was uneasy about the question, but he didn't know why. It was an innocent question, and Yukimura would never turn on him. "... yeah."

Yukimura grinned, but his eyes were sharp and analytical. Maybe the captain could tell he was making Ryoma uncomfortable. He slid back under his covers and looked almost peaceful. Except for his eyes;

they were so intense, fierce, driven. "I'll be better by the finals. If Seigaku's as good as the rest of the regulars all said, we'll see them at some point."

Ryoma nodded. "Yes, they're very good."

"Hm," was Yukimura's noncommittal response. Ryoma rather liked silence. Too many people underestimated the comfort in silence.

"You played against the Tensai of Seigaku," Yukimura said, breaking the untroubled silence. Ryoma just nodded and muttered, "Fuji." Yukimura smiled and nodded too, and Ryoma had the distinct feeling that Yukimura was manipulating the conversation toward some end he wouldn't like.

"How did it go?"

"It was fun," was Ryoma's first thought.

"I meant, what was the score?"

Ryoma paused. He had forgotten, rather stupidly, that Yukimura just wanted the victory. Nervous, for no real reason he could decipher, he answered, "7-5."

"That's awfully close," Yukimura said with a slight frown. For some unfathomable reason, Ryoma felt that even the frown was put upon; not genuine. He shrugged, not having an answer for his captain's observation.

Yukimura still didn't look angry, but he looked disappointed, or hurt. "I heard the other matches were 6-1 and 6-4. But 7-5, it must have been really challenging. Especially playing against a friend."

This was what Yukimura was building toward. Because Ryoma knew the Seigaku team well, even Yukimura thought it was a hindrance.

"Friends can play competitively. It's no fun to play with friends unless you plan to win anyway," he reasoned.

"Are you sure they are as loyal to you as you are to them?" Yukimura asked. What did he mean? Of course the Seigaku regulars were loyal to him... they did so much for him. More than he would expect from any team. If he had less faith in them, he would be skeptical of their motives for hanging around him. Ryoma wiped all suspicion from his mind. Doubting them now would do no good.

"Loyal? No, we're all just friends," Ryoma lied. They weren't just friends now, were they? They were almost like his family.

"Oh. But from what I heard," Yukimura started. God no, Ryoma thought, he didn't want to know what Yukimura heard. "I heard that you started trying to throw the game? That you were hitting smashes when it was obvious that Fuji Shusuke could return them? That you lost two games playing around, and then two more while he was blind? You realize it's the tensai's own fault that he didn't step off the court when he was injured. You didn't need to feel sorry for him."

Ryoma ducked his head. When Fuji had lost his sight, Ryoma hadn't tried going easy on him. In fact, he had gotten even more desperate and determined to win. Somehow, somehow, Fuji had overcome the blindness and started playing better than he had before. It was frightening. It wasn't that Ryoma had been going easy on him; he just didn't have the ability.

"But I know you'd never do anything to risk our chances of winning, Echizen-kun." That was new, Ryoma thought. Had Yukimura ever called him Echizen-kun?

Ryoma just shook his head. Of course he would never plan something to risk Rikkai's chance of victory.

"So you can help the team, *Echizen-kun* . All we need is your cooperation."

It had been a few days, and Ryoma still hadn't been by to visit the captain. He didn't know how Yukimura thought he'd get away with trying to convince him to betray his friends. Even though Yukimura was sitting in a hospital bed, Ryoma would never do such a thing. It was the principle of the matter! Not to mention that Ryoma did know some things that Yanagi-senpai never had in his notebooks... Ryoma could do a lot of damage. The things he had heard at the diner were almost sacred.

Like how Sanada's improved Fuu Rin Ka In Zan Rai could most definitely defeat Tezuka and anyone else on the Seigaku team. That right now, the only person in Japan with the ability to defeat Sanada was probably Yukimura himself. That Tezuka was coming back from rehabilitation, but a hard match would become too much for his arm far too easily.

Kikumaru's seal step was swift and almost supernatural; Ryoma swore he saw Kikumaru giving himself a high five once.

Oishi had Oishi territory, a companion to Kikumaru's seal step, and together, they were almost reaching synchro.

Fuji was working on a fourth counter and had practiced advancing the three he already had.

Kaidoh's snake shot was more frightening than ever, and his endurance had reached inhuman peaks.

Taka-san's Hadoukyuu had reached a higher level than the power hitters of any other schools.

Inui had a new serve, faster than even his sonic serve, faster even than Chotarou's scud serve.

Momo-chan-senpai really had no new techniques, but he was building up power and would be a formidable opponent when paired with Kaidoh.

A pair that Ryoma had jokingly suggested a month ago. And which the Seigaku regulars took to heart, seeing as they used the pair against Rikkaidai.

Ryoma really knew a lot about his friends. He more listened than talked in the past few months when he had been trying to separate himself from them, and he naturally absorbed everything he heard and saw.

He wondered if this was the warning Niou was trying to give him. He wondered how much of what Niou said was true. He wondered if Kirihara had been put through the same. Obviously, he never had to experience the bullying-did he? No, Ryoma thought, Kirihara was a bastard, and had no excuse.

Kirihara had entered Rikkaidai with the perfect Rikkai attitude; win, and win at all costs. Losing is not permitted. Ryoma wondered how much of that was just childish enthusiasm and how much was the blind ambition he saw in his teammates now. Had Kirihara entered Rikkai knowing that he'd be backhanded if he lost a game to another team? Had he known that he would have to adopt the Rikkaidai personality as his own? Or was Kirihara always that way?

Ryoma didn't want to feel sorry for Kirihara or to sympathize with him.

"Why the long face?" his mother smiled sadly upon seeing him enter the apartment. She was seated by the kotatsu, needle in one hand and a stuffed giraffe in the other.

"Long day." It was midday and his boss had told him to leave after he had accidentally overturned a tray onto two customers and a few minutes later set half the kitchen on fire while he was dozing. He was lucky he still had a job. Actually, that reminded him. "Hey, aren't you supposed to be at work?"

Her tentative smile fell immediately at his words, and she sat by the kotatsu, laying her tired hands on the tabletop. "Apparently, it had

been long in coming." Ryoma felt something heavy drop into his stomach. He thought it was something like dread.

"My boss said I had been hanging by a thread for a long time, but that Sanada-san and his son had been convincing him not to fire me." She didn't seem too troubled. Ryoma supposed she had taken a few of her pills. The anti-depressants, not the other ones.

Ryoma knew where this was going and why this happened. Was Sanada-senpai so petty? "... now what?"

"Now I go job hunting. Ryuzaki-sensei said she is willing to help me."

"You've really warmed up to her," Ryoma noticed, opting for a more pleasant topic, a distraction. He had no idea when his mother would have had the time to socialize with Ryuzaki other than during the short vacation in Chiba. But they must have bonded over something, because those two always had something to talk about.

"Mhm," she said lightly. Ryoma thought there was a bit more to it, but said nothing. "Well, this is still earning some money." She seemed to enjoy sewing eyes now. Ryoma had to admit that mindless, constant work was calming to an extent. The reminder of why they were doing so, however, made him worry.

"Oh, a letter came for you yesterday. I forgot to give it to you," she said, standing up. She handed him an envelope with his name written in English. Who would write to him from America?

This wasn't his computer. The McDonald's off his street had free internet as long as he bought something. He drank the last of his coke and stared at what he had looked up on the computer.

First round. \$19,000

Second round. \$31,000

Third, \$48,000

He would leave with money no matter what. He noisily finished off his drink. "Nineteen thousand," he pronounced to himself in English. It felt like a big word, a big expensive word. And that was only the first round. He looked at the biggest prize.

"One million, six hundred thousand American dollars," he muttered. ¥149,100,000.

But teenage boys from Japan didn't get to be wildcard entries by doing nothing, and that's exactly what Ryoma had done. Nothing. It would have been understandable if it were a Japanese tournament. Well, he still was a citizen of the United States, did that carry some weight? He had won those junior titles, and although one of them had guaranteed a wildcard at some British tournament (that he never bothered trying), he never thought he'd get one as prestigious as this.

"One hundred forty-nine million one hundred thousand yen." He couldn't stop whispering the figures to himself, the numbers. Onehundredforty-. Onehundredforty-. Onehundredforty-. Onehundredforty-. One hundred forty-nine million one hundred thousand yen.

Hm. How much would be removed for taxes?

Never mind the taxes! It was one hundred forty-nine million one hundred thousand yen!

The logical part of his brain finally decided to kick in. He didn't need a million dollars. He would settle after the second or third round. He had years to make more money from tournaments, and he only needed enough to make him and his mother comfortable for a year before he'd try for other Opens. He could make it back for the last matches in the Nationals with a good amount in his bank. But... did he even want to? Yes, he thought to himself. The Nationals had been his goal since his arrival in Japan. Even if he had to play

alongside Rikkaidai. But then he'd have to miss the first part of the Nationals, and would Yukimura even allow such a thing? No, Yukimura would never let him just skip the first matches. It was one or the other, not both.

Hm. Did he want to leave Rikkaidai and the Nationals behind and pursue the money, the glory? Or did he want to stay with Rikkai for the entirety, forsaking the financial relief he would have found? Ryoma found himself wondering how much he still wanted to be part of Rikkaidai. The harassment had stopped for the most part, and the other Regulars seemed to be warming up to him, even the elusive Niou. He could almost forget the bullying and see that some people on his team were trying. But were they enough to outweigh all of the negatives of staying at Rikkai?

He threw away his paper cup and walked outside. Another night at the diner. Maybe Seigaku would help him make a decision. Or at the very least, make him laugh.

Marui Bunta was naturally a playful sort. He was extroverted, outgoing, emotional, the kind of traits commonly seen in genius volley experts like himself. He was ambling around the court chewing his gum since practice had just finished for the day, and Jackal was loitering outside, probably waiting for him. Sanada-fukubuchou had been running everyone ragged since they had won the Kantou Championship. He couldn't imagine how tough practice would have been had they lost.

On his way to the gates, Marui had mastered the art of blowing bubbles and whistling at the same time. It was a matter of practice really, getting around the anatomy of it all. To really challenge himself, he tossed three tennis balls onto his racket and started juggling them. It was all too simple, he bragged to himself.

"Watch out, Marui-senpai!" It was Kiri-hara. Marui had barely a second before the younger boy was barreling into him and his tennis balls were flying every which way.

"Kirihara-kuuun, look what you did!" His tennis balls had flown somewhere, probably behind the clubhouse.

"Marui-senpai, I'd really help you out, but you know, my dad'll get mad if I'm not home soon. See ya!" Kirihara-kun said his goodbyes and practically leaped over the fence. Marui was reminded of when the kid was a freshman in middle school and ran around the school jumping brick walls and just generally making a nuisance of himself.

Dropping his things, he laughed to himself, and found that he didn't mind if he had to go around the clubhouse to retrieve his tennis balls. Watching Kirihara frenziedly leap the walls was entertaining enough that his mood couldn't be brought down.

"What're you gonna do, Echizen?"

Who was that? Marui peeked around the corner of the tennis clubhouse to see three boys and Echizen Ryoma, his tennis bag dirty on the ground. That kid. Marui wasn't sure what to think of him now. He had heard of how Kirihara had teased him; how the other kids enjoyed making fun of him. Who wouldn't? The kid was arrogant and full of himself. Marui hadn't heard the whole story of what happened several months ago at the indoor gyms, but from what he heard, Echizen had goaded Kirihara, and after their scuffle, Kirihara got away with a firm backhand and Echizen got to skip the rest of practice.

"I heard Sanada's washed his hands of you," another boy snarled. Marui wasn't sure what he meant. What was that about Sanada?

"Can't hide behind the vice captain anymore, can you, bitch?"

Marui's ears perked. This seemed like way more than a simple case of teasing. Or bullying.

But Echizen had some brains to back up his claim to arrogance. He ran.

The three boys followed him, Marui swiftly shadowing them. He wasn't the country's best serve and volley specialist for nothing. He realized what was happening a millisecond before Echizen had to dodge the attacks, almost tripping on Marui's forgotten things, and the first punch landed. Ouch, that had to hurt. Marui had to stop this, even though it was Echizen.

As one boy reared his foot back for a mighty kick into Echizen's side, Marui caught the offending leg, making the boy take a tumble onto his own backside. "Now, what's going on here?"

"M-Marui-senpai! We were just uh, that is-" The boy scrambled up and looked like he was ready to run. But none of them could possibly outrun Marui Bunta.

Marui just lifted an eyebrow, crossed his arms, and blew a bubble. He wanted to hear what convoluted story they'd tell now, but didn't bother asking Echizen himself. He remembered the troubles Kirihara had had back in middle school; the kid was just as competitive and arrogant as he was now. And Kirihara had made up all sorts of stories, about how he tripped down the stairs or ran into a door, just so that he could cling to his pride.

Was this the same situation? He could hardly believe that anyone would try to hurt Echizen now. The boy was adorable when he didn't seem like a traitor. He glanced down at the fallen boy, and was shocked to see the boy staring back. His fearless hazel eyes still had some glow, some life, unlike the Kirihara that Marui remembered from years ago. Was he stronger than Kirihara, or was his situation just not as bad?

"Marui!" the vice captain barked.

Marui turned around to see Sanada standing there, looking weary and ready to go home. He wondered what sort of picture they all made, with his own form looming ominously over three juniors and with Echizen, also a junior, still on the ground from the first solid

punch. He figured if anything, he'd get in trouble and he could explain away why he looked like he had just terrorized four juniors.

"It's not what it looks like!" Marui knew that at one point he had entertained the thought of hurting Echizen, but he would never act on it. Put him on guard and scare the kid, maybe, and only because it was for Yukimura-buchou.

But he had underestimated Sanada's powers of analysis. "Let the juniors settle their issues themselves," fukubuchou said apathetically. Marui had overestimated Sanada's compassion. "They don't need us to interfere." Sanada had no compassion. So Sanada could tell that he had stepped in, that Marui had hurt no one. But wasn't the captain going to say something about how Echizen was gingerly standing up with an arm over his stomach and the other boys looking at him with satisfied looks on their faces?

Marui had hoped that Sanada had just misread the situation. "Sanada, they were harrassing him-"

"Like I said," Sanada interrupted, speaking more coldly than Marui had ever heard him, "Echizen can fight his own battles." And if that wasn't a claim of contempt-toward Echizen's survival and ability to thrive-then it was certainly a definitive claim of indifference.

Marui looked back at the juniors to see that whatever light had lingered in Echizen's eyes was gone and making his tormentors' eyes glitter.

Sanada didn't say another word and went into the tennis clubhouse, probably to gather his things.

"See ya tomorrow in class, Echizen," one boy sneered. Marui took a threatening step toward him, and the boy quickly scampered away, followed by his two cohorts.

"What just happened, Echizen?" Marui finally asked.

Echizen just looked at him with an expression that was half confused and half incredulous. Like he couldn't believe that Marui actually sounded concerned about him. For some reason, Marui felt nervous as Echizen's eyes searched him up and down.

Marui thought he could see satisfaction in the boy's reaction, because he gave an answer. "Nothing happened, Marui-senpai." Or maybe that look had been one of resignation. The boy turned away and walked toward the area behind the clubhouse.

He wasn't sure what urged him to grab Echizen's shoulder and twist him around. But he was sure that there was some kind of on-going problem as he saw Echizen cringe and squeeze his eyes shut. What, the boy wasn't even going to attempt to fight back?

When it was obvious that nothing was going to happen, Echizen slowly opened one eye, and then the other.

"I'm sure nothing happened," Marui said sarcastically. This was starting to worry him. It didn't seem like Echizen even tried to defend himself. What happened to the boy who was full of himself, the boy who had taunted Kirihara-kun and dared make his own relationship with the Seigaku team known?

Angrily, Echizen twisted out from his grip, and darted behind the clubhouse. Marui was left still wondering what just happened.

He would get some answers. Now. "Sanada!" he hollered as he threw the door to the clubhouse open.

"Marui," Sanada responded calmly. He was zipping up his tennis bag, just about ready to leave for the day. Fukubuchou's straight face and unemotional response only frustrated him.

"What the hell, Sanada? I told you they were harassing him! One of them punched him, and they were gonna beat him up!" Marui complained. He knew that sometimes he sounded childish, but he hoped that this one time Sanada would take him seriously.

Of all the things Marui thought Sanada would say, "I know," was the last.

He blinked. "Then... why? You would hit Kirihara in favor that kid, but you won't help Echizen when he's actually in danger?" Marui didn't understand. He wasn't stupid, not by a long shot, but often the Big Three, the Three Demons, worked silently without the knowledge or consent of the rest of the team. They always had a reason, a brilliant end to justify the unsavory means. For once, Marui pleaded in his mind, for once, couldn't Sanada give him the reason first?

"He's a traitor, Marui." It was short, simple, like every other statement Sanada made.

That was it? Marui thought they had already established that Echizen was part of Rikkaidai, that even though Seigaku was the first school to find out about Buchou's condition, Echizen wouldn't have sold Yukimura-buchou out. "Hardly! Did you see him against Fuji Shusuke from Seigaku? He beat him! Almost literally!"

"Only after I... retrieved him from whatever fantasy he was indulging himself in! Moreover... !" Sanada seemed to take effort to compose himself. Marui had never seen him lose control of his emotions. Even when he had no choice but to deliver his fearsome backhand, the boy never lost control. But now, Marui could see him struggling. "Moreover," he repeated, "He's a traitor. He was at the Seigaku training camp."

Marui's chest constricted. "You can't know that." Echizen couldn't have done such a thing. Maybe it had been a reconnaissance mission?

Sanada looked away and shouldered his tennis bag. It looked like the entire world was weighing heavily on that shoulder. "Yukimura asked him, and he confessed. More than that, he won't say a word about Seigaku. Won't tell us how they knew about Yukimura's condition or what they're planning or even how accurate Renji's data

are. He knows, and he won't do a damn thing to help Rikkaidai. Or Seiichi," he ended sadly.

They all played for the glory of Rikkaidai. It was their purpose. To think that there was one member, especially a regular, who didn't see that as the ultimate goal was just wrong. Any other person in the tennis club would die to secure Rikkai's victory. The least Echizen could do was confirm data they already had. The very least, and the boy still wouldn't do that.

What ties could the boy possibly have with Seigaku? What made him so close to them? He spent all day at Rikkai, in class, and then most of the afternoon in tennis with his fellow regulars. When did he have the time to fraternize with them? Marui didn't want to let his imagination get away from him, but he couldn't help but think that maybe Echizen had infiltrated their team for the sole purpose of undermining their efforts to win. His mind conjured a sneaky, quiet genius boy in a tuxedo working for the other team who-

"Marui."

Marui snapped his head up, breaking him from his musings. "Yeah?" He looked around, realizing that Sanada was already out of the clubhouse and had his keys out to lock it for the night.

"So... so what does this mean?" Marui was lost. Terribly lost.

"It means that until he proves otherwise, we treat him like the traitor he is," Sanada said simply. He looked like he was struggling with it though. Sometimes, Marui thought, Sanada had a one-track mind. He knew Sanada had to have some compassion left within him. Sanada was a nice guy back in middle school, back when winning was changing from a side benefit of the fun of tennis to a relentless, driving force. Now, he was like a robot who could only follow orders that were programmed into him. And the half-imagined thought swirling through Marui's troubled mind was that Yukimura was the programmer.

"What are we doing again?" Jackal asked for the fiftieth time.

"We're seeing what Echizen's up to!" Marui whispered harshly, ducked his head, and then sent an apologetic look to his friend. Jackal knew that Marui had heard or seen something strange; he wasn't usually this worried or hostile. Since Marui was lighter on his feet, Jackal figured it would be easier to hide away if Echizen happened to look back if he followed the more agile tennis player.

Curiously, the boy didn't seem to notice his red-haired friend at all. It didn't match up well with what he knew of the boy. He always seemed so alert, so aware. Though Marui was acting strangely too.

But, Jackal considered, the boy was bent over a little, with his arm over his stomach. From what Marui said, the punch couldn't have been that hard. A shiver ran up his spine when he realized that what happened behind the clubhouse could have been more than a one-time thing. To Echizen, it could've been business as usual. Nothing out of the ordinary.

That didn't sit well with him, so he continued to trail the boy and followed Marui's directions. The boy stopped for a minute to pull out a clean sheet of paper and a pen. Jackal had no idea what it was for, but the boy continued walking anyway. Shadowing the boy felt like shadowing Kirihara all those years ago. He chuckled to himself because it felt like history was repeating itself. Back then, there was also no love lost between the upstart tennis player and Sanada.

Of everything he expected, a restaurant was the last. The boy looked so tired, so downtrodden that Jackal thought that a bar would be a more likely destination. Or an arcade as it had been with Kirihara.

He finally caught up to Marui once he stopped at the diner, noting that his friend looked puzzled too. They wanted to go in, to see why the boy was there, because was he really stopping for a snack? Really? There must have been another destination after this.

Both of them were peeking around the corner of the diner's entrance, wondering if they were going to have to wait for Echizen to finish eating.

"You're not doing a very good job of stalking me."

Jackal jumped and accidentally knocked Marui over. "Echizen!" he yelped uncharacteristically, turning around to face the emotionless junior. And then, looking the boy up and down, said, "Echizen?" The boy didn't stop to acknowledge him and just entered the diner through the back door, leaving Jackal and Marui to gawk.

"We're going in," Marui decided for both of them. Jackal agreed. They needed to get to the bottom of this.

Jackal didn't even try to slink into the diner, walking in like a normal customer. After seating himself at a nearby booth, he raised an eyebrow at his friend who was still hovering by the door, trying to look inconspicuous. Which made him very suspicious-looking indeed. Marui's eyes were darting back and forth and he walked sideways against the walls before speeding into a seat across from Jackal and leaning back into the cushion.

"Why'd you take a booth?" said the irritating voice of that junior, Echizen.

Jackal was tired of being surprised by this unpredictable boy. "It was closest," Marui answered even though Jackal had picked the booth. Was Echizen even eating here? It just looked like he had been wandering around, watching people eat.

"This one is reserved," Echizen said simply and walked away. Jackal watched him stop by a table, whip out a dish rag, and wipe it down haphazardly. He seemed preoccupied. He elbowed Marui and nodded to the next booth over. Marui took the seat across from him facing the entrance, with his legs crossed on the cushion, and craned his head to see the boy.

"Sanada-fukubuchou doesn't know about this part-time job," Marui stated, smacking his gum.

Jackal nodded. "Obviously. He would never let a member of the team take on a part-time job while we're supposed to be training for the Nationals."

"... you think Echizen needs it?" Marui wondered aloud. Jackal wasn't sure. There was always financial aid, government aid, all sorts of welfare that someone could claim if he needed money. Wasn't Echizen a scholarship student anyway? And the school had all sorts of work-study programs even though it was just a high school. Unless Echizen needed the money for something other than tuition. Jackal mentally rolled his eyes. He could see some of the students at Rikkai working a part time job to earn money for a car or a new gaming system, but not Echizen. He didn't seem the type.

"I think he does need it. Though for what, I've no idea."

"Oooooooooochibi-chan!"

Jackal recognized that epithet. "Marui-quick!" he whispered urgently. Marui must have seen the people who entered because before Jackal could blink, the redhead was seated next to him with the backs of their heads facing the newcomers. He hoped they weren't recognized; the pair of them made a distinct impression because they were so different. Even their haircuts, or lack thereof.

"What'll you have, Kikumarū?"

What? Was Echizen, who apparently worked here, so familiar with the Seigaku regulars? No honorific titles at all? He dearly wanted to turn around so he could see how many of them were there and where they were seated.

"Ah, something cold. Surprise me!" Jackal could hear it clearly. The Seigaku regulars were sitting right behind them. Which meant that the booth Jackal had been sitting in earlier was reserved for these

people. He saw Echizen go to the kitchen area in the corner of his eye, but was pulled away from watching Echizen when he heard the conversation behind him.

"Something's wrong." Jackal didn't know the Seigaku regulars well enough to know who was speaking.

"95% chance that he is injured." That was their data collector. Their version of Yanagi Renji.

"Again," someone sighed.

Jackal exchanged a meaningful look with Marui without turning his head completely. Neither of them wanted Seigaku to know they were there listening.

"Dammit!" A fist slammed into the table.

Jackal had to control his flinch at the loud sound. These people, how well did they know Echizen? The boy came back, balancing ten drinks on a tray. Obviously, they hung out here often enough that Echizen didn't have to take their drink orders. The boy surreptitiously put two drinks on Jackal and Marui's table without attracting the regulars' attention.

"Fuji, we're out of Heart Attack Heat, but my boss has a new wasabi burger in the works. Do you want to try it?"

"Sounds great."

Even Fuji Shusuke was on good terms with him. Hadn't Echizen blinded him? Aimed for him, attacked him? How was Fuji Shusuke so calm and friendly? Jackal knew what Marui was thinking as the boy's cheeks were turning red in growing anger. No matter how someone spun it, it seemed rather like Echizen was on better terms with them than with his own team. The thought that Echizen had plotted with them arose more than once

Jackal didn't bother listening to them order and instead looked up what a Heart Attack Heat was in the menu. Reading the description, he decided that Fuji Shusuke was frightening in more than one way.

"Are you gonna ask him what he's decided?" Jackal put his menu down to listen in on their conversation. What were they talking about? Was Echizen deciding something?

"... We'll have to. But what a decision. And no time at all to make it."

"If he were with us," someone said vehemently, "he'd play all the way to the Nationals." Jackal almost growled.

"No," another hissed his contradiction. "This is a great opportunity. If we were his team, we would encourage him to go. It's obvious he wants to."

Jackal heard the nod in the next boy's voice. It was kind and unassuming. "It would be our job to make sure there are no regrets. We can't weigh him down." Jackal didn't remember playing against someone from Seigaku who seemed like this.

"And he'd be safe." That was Fuji Shusuke, Jackal recognized his voice from a few minutes ago. "And Oishi would be able to get a decent night's rest."

Jackal had no idea what they were talking about.

A few of them laughed. "You can tell?" one boy asked. Jackal assumed this was Oishi.

"Like it isn't obvious," another boy hissed again. Jackal thought he recognized him; maybe he was the one with the snake shot. "You're doing a much better job than Yukimura ever did. I have no idea why Echizen-kun's defending them." It was funny. No one in Rikkaidai ever called him Echizen-kun.

Marui didn't look angry so much as confused now. Jackal was trying to understand the flow of the conversation. This Oishi was doing something better than Yukimura-buchou, and there was something about Echizen defending them? The Rikkai regulars?

"I just want to steal him away from Rikkai." Ha! Jackal shouted to himself silently. In his mind, he fistpumped the air because he finally got Seigaku's motives. They were being friendly to Echizen to lure him to Seigaku's tennis team! He had to tell Echizen, because even though the boy was unnaturally smart, any person would gravitate toward people who paid enough attention. The fact that he was being deceived would be pushed to the subconscious or ignored in favor of the smiles he got from these eight. Someone needed to snap him back to reality.

"I want to play against him in the Nationals, though," someone pouted. It could've been Fuji.

"That would be great. Imagine it! The stadium, and us against them... it would be some great tennis."

"If they don't kill him first."

What on earth were they talking about? What was going on? Was Echizen in some sort of danger? From whom? His mind instantly conjured primetime dramas, of loan sharks and the yakuza. Maybe that's why he needed money...

"I have one fresh wasabi burger, some salads, more burgers... shouldn't you be in training?" Echizen suddenly asked while he was passing out food. He surreptitiously slid two baskets of warm burgers onto Jackal and Marui's table.

"Yeah, so?" someone asked defensively.

"What's with all the junk food?" Echizen responded. Jackal would have wondered the same thing, looking down at the greasy bun.

"Well, you don't have anything else here," another one said simply. Jackal already knew it, but to have it spelled out so simply... the regulars only came to this diner for Echizen. He wondered how the boy would respond.

He looked troubled for a half second, and then cheekily said, "We could put some of Inui-senpai's drinks on the menu." Senpai? *Senpai?*

A chorus of shouts and choking sounds burst from the booth behind him. "Aw, Echizen-kun, that would be an affront to mankind!"-"Don't joke like that, it's disgusting"-"You'd lose every customer in a heartbeat."-"Which is all they'll have before they pass out."

"I don't think they're that bad."

"Shut up, Fuji."

Jackal was surprised to see that Marui was laughing to himself. He raised an eyebrow to ask what was so funny, and the redhead just shrugged with a bright smile on his face. Jackal had to admit that this team seemed much livelier than theirs. Friendlier too. It was no wonder that Echizen had clung to these people. The boy was smiling too, and Jackal wondered if he had ever seen the younger boy smile.

"Echizen-kun," Fuji said and paused. "Ochibi, you know you'll have to make a decision some time."

It was blunt and frank, but still Jackal and Marui didn't know what was going on or what this great decision was.

"I have."

Silence followed Echizen's simple words. Jackal dearly wanted to know what decision was plaguing Echizen so. He turned a little so he could see the boy, and was taken aback by the boy's fierce eyes directed straight toward him and Marui. But they flickered back to the Seigaku boys and Echizen took a breath. "I'm gonna go for it."

Go for what? Was he planning to leave Rikkaidai? Was it so hard to get a full explanation around here?

"We'll miss you."

"Mm."

Echizen came up to him after the Seigaku regulars had left. They hadn't stayed long, claiming that they all had several other things to do and that they'd be back the next day anyway. Marui had left too because his younger brothers had called him on his cell-something about flooding the bathroom. Jackal wasn't sure why he had stayed in the booth, but he couldn't bring himself to leave without getting some answers from this person he thought he had pegged down as a snob. But Echizen was the one to initiate contact. "You tell me what they were talking about whenever I left, and I'll tell you whatever you want."

Jackal analyzed the boy. He seemed completely serious. "Well, they're concerned for your safety," he said. More concerned than the Rikkai regulars ever were. Why, he wondered. "Whatever decision you had to make, some of them saw it as a great opportunity and some thought it would be a disappointment that you weren't on their team and they wouldn't see you in the Nationals. Are you planning to go somewhere, Echizen?"

Sidestepping his question, Echizen asked him his own. "What made you think they were concerned for my safety?"

Jackal huffed. "Said something about Yukimura not doing as good a job as their guy, Oishi. What is going on? What job is this supposed to be? And why do they think someone's out to kill you?"

"They said that?"

"Yes, they did," Jackal said calmly. He wasn't going to allow Echizen the luxury of avoiding his questions. "Now, Echizen, I want some

answers."

Echizen reached into his bag and pulled out a folded paper. It wasn't taped or sealed in any way. "You can read it if you want, but make sure it gets to Sanada." He dropped it onto the table. "My coworker said he's going to lock up in ten minutes." And with that, the boy was gone.

Jackal fingered the paper, a little crinkled and asking to be opened. It was practically unfolding itself, as it seemed Echizen had haphazardly folded it not too long ago. He could see the writing, which was definitely not Japanese. Comforted by this, since he wasn't fluent in English and it wouldn't be a complete breach of privacy-what breach? Echizen did say he could read it-he laid it open on the table.

"Sanada et al,

It is with deepest regret that I write this resignation, effective immediately. Ask Jackal or Marui for the date, because I don't have a calendar on me. I thought this would be a simple resignation with the simple explanation for my departure, but I cannot help putting these more pressing thoughts on paper for you all to read.

I appreciate what I've learned from Rikkaidai: To win at all costs, to follow one's leader without challenge or original thought, to make no exceptions except for those you like, and several other life lessons. Sadly, I must say that I will not be taking these lessons with me as I make my path away from Rikkai. Yes, I will try to win, but when the reporters ask what my drive is, why I'm playing, I will tell them I am playing for myself and my loved ones.

I considered staying. After all, Niou and Yanagi were good upperclassmen to me. There isn't a direct translation for 'senpai' into English, but you all know the connotations of a 'senpai' as opposed to a simple upperclassman. Not one person at Rikkai has deserved my respect, save for Yukimura and maybe the two listed above. I

considered staying for the team until I realized that the team would rather not have me.

It's not Rikkai, it's me. After all, Rikkai is perfect. Rikkai is unfailing. Rikkai is unchanging. Rikkai is the champion. Rikkai is the home of all you people who follow Sanada without a word, and for some reason, I just cannot fit your mold.

You've no idea how hard it was for me to pen this letter. Walking down the street trying not to laugh at the two idiots trailing me was hard enough, but surreptitiously writing this in English when all I've spoken for the last two years has been Japanese, whew! Also, feel free to hand this over to Kirihara, because I'm sure he's too stupid to read it himself anyway.

Regards,

Ryoma Echizen.

P.S. Did I mention I'm going to the U.S. Open? Silly me, something must've rattled my head.

P.P.S. Don't expect me to come back to Rikkaidai after I beat Federer."

Next chapter: Many farewells, and one hello

Many Farewells and One Hello

Chapter Eleven: Many Farewells and One Hello

"Is it true?" Yukimura inquired the second Echizen stepped into his hospital room.

"... Sanada told you."

Yukimura's serene façade fell away. "That's Sanada- *fukubuchou* to you," he corrected with a hard voice. He had read the odious letter. Jackal had come to him first before giving the paper to Sanada.

Echizen shook his head. "Not anymore."

The rage in Yukimura's eyes was potent, palpable, something that would have cowed lesser people. But Echizen stood firm, never letting his own calm eyes leave the other boy's. "I wanted to tell you in person." The boy still had some respect for him; how quaint. Yukimura couldn't tell what good could come from such a confrontation. Already, things were not going well for the younger boy.

Yukimura turned his back toward him, turning over on his bed. "It's no surprise," Yukimura said after a moment. "After all, everyone was right in calling you a traitor, hm?" Changing his mind, he sat up with ease and looked back at the confused junior. He wanted to see the boy's traitorous face.

"What?"

Ah, he thought, so Echizen still hadn't realized that Yukimura knew all about the supposed treachery. Everyone had tried to keep it from him, to protect poor, ill Seiichi. Oh, but Yukimura knew it all.

"I heard the murmuring and the accusations. 'Oh Echizen, how could you tell Seigaku about our poor frail captain?'" Yukimura scoffed,

"After all, they confronted you right outside my door, and I have very good hearing." Yukimura smiled the same serene smile as he always had, but his voice was anything but the kind tone he used to have. "I could tell, after that, you were much more... like a member of Rikkai." He wouldn't detail all of his ruminations. A whirlwind of thoughts had assaulted his mind at the time, and he had wondered if he should say something. But he waited, and what rewards came to those who wait!

"Did Tezuka ever tell you that he saw me here?" Yukimura asked with a smile. Oh, the confusion on the boy's face! That served him right-did he think he could leave Rikkai right before the Nationals and get away scot-free?

"No," was Echizen's simple answer. Yukimura could tell that the boy was thinking, putting the strange pieces together, and forming a horrible picture. It had been the right thing to do, to keep the knowledge of the meeting to himself, Yukimura kept telling himself, because Echizen started to rely on Rikkai at that moment. Echizen had started to drift away from Tezuka and his men, and Echizen became a loyal subject in Yukimura's kingdom. Whoever said that Sanada was the Emperor?

"Well, it wasn't a long encounter. I asked that he keep the information of my illness, at the very least, to his school, since I figured no captain would keep that information from his team, and I said I would do the same."

And Echizen blinked. There, it seemed everything had finally clicked for him. "You knew they considered me a traitor." Yukimura nodded. "You knew it was because Seigaku was aware of your condition, and you knew how they knew." Yukimura nodded again. "Did you know all the crap I had to go through because you wouldn't say a word on my behalf?" Yukimura nodded.

"Don't you nod at me, you couldn't possibly know!"

Had Echizen ever shouted at him before? "Hush boy, you're in a hospital," he answered patronizingly. Just to piss the boy off. "Does it matter?" Yukimura asked loftily, "You've still revealed yourself to be a traitor."

Was that outrage in the boy's eyes? What right did he have to be outraged! Yukimura had been sitting in a hospital bed for months, death whispering in his ear, and Echizen thought his life was so bad! He doubted the boy could have lived through the pain and depression that he had gone through. The kid's words, his optimistic words were those of an idealist, someone who wasn't in touch with the pain of reality. Let Echizen roll around in his blissful life, why not?

"Has it ever occurred to you that you betrayed me first?" the boy asked, his usually stoic voice full of suppressed emotion. Yukimura didn't want to argue semantics. Yukimura had been trying to *help* the boy realize that he couldn't depend on Seigaku. What would happen if Echizen continued to play tennis matches against Tezuka Kunimitsu and started feeling like a part of the Seigaku team? Anyway, it had worked to Rikkai's advantage in the beginning, so Yukimura had no reason to feel guilty. Why it hadn't worked the second time around, Yukimura wasn't sure.

"Hardly," Yukimura said in his calm voice. "You betrayed us the moment you misled Genichirou at the indoor courts." He could see Echizen, the gears in his head turning furiously. Because this meant that Yukimura knew how long Echizen had known the Seigaku regulars. He wondered what the boy was thinking now. "Yes, Tezuka had some words for me about a middle school player with golden eyes and a white cap. He told me I should watch out for such a good player, that I should control my team. But he still thought you were in middle school." Yukimura paused and adopted a concerned tone, "You didn't tell them? About your grade, your school?" Yukimura didn't let the thought of his successful maneuvering taint his contrived voice.

Echizen shook his head. It wasn't the only part that was shaking. "W-Why does it matter?" The boy looked angry at himself for a moment,

for the short moment it took for his voice to sound unsteady. Obviously, he had never let himself get this unsettled.

"Oh, they didn't mind that you never corrected them about what year you were? That you never even told them your name? That they had to find out on the court? They accepted you into their training camp even after they lost the Kantou Tournament to you, their supposed friend. They really didn't mind that you *blinded* their best player? Or sent Tezuka to the hospital?" Echizen's face drained of all color.

Or did Echizen not know that? How sweet, Yukimura thought, that Seigaku hadn't even told Echizen that Tezuka's elbow started to rapidly lose function after that one game. Because Tezuka had to go all out. Yukimura couldn't hold back his knowing smile. "They didn't tell you, hm? And you don't find that suspicious at all?"

"... What are you trying to imply, Yukimura?"

Ha! Outright disrespect! "Must I spell it out, Echizen-kun?" he used a friendly voice to belie the venom in his words, "All they want is your talent on their team." Jackal had told him as much.

"Ridiculous." Echizen turned his back to him, but paused at Yukimura's parting words.

"Does everything else make sense, though, Echizen? For them to pay so much attention to some random urchin, for them to exert so much energy for you? What makes you special to them? Think about it."

Echizen didn't let another word of Yukimura's poison reach his ears as he stormed from the hospital room. Did it matter whether Yukimura's words were based on truth or half-truths? Yukimura was sure that not one person in the whole world was as magnanimous as Echizen thought his miracle Seigaku friends were. Let alone eight.

He knew the doubts that would surface in the boy's mind. If Echizen left Rikkaidai, at least he wouldn't play for Seigaku. Of that, Yukimura

would make sure.

"This... this is all suffocating," she muttered to him once while in the throes of her depression.

"Don't you want me to be happy?" she asked one rainy afternoon.

But it didn't happen often. She didn't entertain those thoughts very often. Over the course of their entire time here, she had vocalized her wish only a few times, and every time, Ryoma convinced her otherwise.

Today, she was doing the dishes as Ryoma walked into their apartment. She glanced at him and then back down at the dishes. In a strangely confident voice, she asked, "Would you be terribly angry with me if I..." Hesitant silence.

"If what?" Ryoma asked wearily. "If you didn't go with me to America?" They'd had this conversation before. He joined her at the sink, manually drying some of the dishes and putting them away. He picked up a glass and started wiping it with the rag.

"If I died."

Crash !

"Oh Ryoma," a strained little laugh escaped her as she lowered herself down to collect the shards of a cup.

"Kaa-san," he choked. He took her hands and helped her to her feet. "Don't, they're sharp. I'll get them." She nodded jerkily and made her way to what passed as the living room. After picking up the bigger shards, he used a broom and a dustpan to collect the rest. Finished with the mindless work, he found that he didn't want to say a word to her.

How dare she?

Was his first thought. His second thought, however, was:

Why?

He forced himself toward the living room and took a cushion by the kotatsu. They sat in the stifling silence until Ryoma asked, "Why?" Usually by now, she would take her words back to comfort him, or she'd allay his fears some other way.

His mother's eyes jerked toward him, and he felt distinctly uncomfortable with her piercing look. "Why? Isn't it my right, Ryoma? To choose whether I suffer here or go join my parents, and your father?"

"Yeah, why don't you take me with you?" he suggested bitterly, having his hope shorn. Was she serious now?

More silence. And then a raspy, "Don't say that, Ryoma." She shook her head slowly. "Don't even think it. You have years ahead of you, decades, a century."

"What, and you don't?" he almost shouted. Why did she want to leave him so badly? What was it about him that drove people away?

"You know it's inevitable."

Ryoma hated that. When she sounded all fatalistic and the gleam in her eye turned into foggiess. When her mind disconnected from the world to imagine an afterlife, an eternity with Echizen Nanjiroh by her side instead of Echizen Ryoma. Ryoma's hands clenched into fists at his side. "The doctors said-"

"The doctors *said*," she interrupted and paused, "they said that my count was low. Very low. I wouldn't be able to go with you if I wanted."

Ryoma hoped she was just talking about the trip to America. "Then stay." Alive.

Ryoma made a decision. "And I'll stay." Alive. With you.

"You have here a wonderful opportunity, Honey. You shouldn't turn it down on my account."

"Then on whose account should I go?" It looked like his mother was about to interrupt him again, but he kept going. "What's the point of winning every goddamn grand slam title if I'll just come back to an empty apartment?"

"Language, Ryoma." She said nothing else and continued to look down at her weary hands. She wouldn't be coming back to him tonight, Ryoma knew.

Fine. Let her die, he thought furiously as he looked at her unmoving form. It's what she wanted after all. It was her *right*, as she said. She controlled her own body, she claimed. Life was too painful, too long, too unsatisfying. Well, Ryoma didn't find his life very appealing either. But he still lived. For her.

Because that's what people do for each other! They lived, right?

...

What was he saying?

His thoughts fought and warred in his mind, and Ryoma felt sick to his stomach as he realized what he'd thought. Really?

Let her die?

What son could think such words? He gazed at the woman who never seemed to see him anymore. He would stay there, though. He would wait for her to fall asleep so he wouldn't have to worry about waking alone, and he'd remember the days when Echizen Rinko wanted to live.

No, no, no, that wasn't the kind of thing you could just ask, Ryoma thought. Was there a more subtle way? Rather than asking, 'Do you like me for me or my tennis?' what could he say? Could he ask them why they had taken interest in the first place? Yes, surely they'd have a logical explanation. And it was a valid question.

He'd already told his boss that he was leaving for America, but he decided he would work until the last day anyway. And those eight were there. Again. He wordlessly served them by rote, and they seemed about ready to leave by ten minutes to midnight.

This was his last night working. What kind of good bye would Seigaku expect? They didn't even know he would be flying to America the next day. Aware that this was his very last chance to get answers, Ryoma asked, "Why did you come back? That second time, when you missed me?" Blunt, simple, to the point.

"Ochibi?" Kikumaru looked confused, as did the rest of them. Did they even know that Ryoma had seen them that night? Ryoma just stood there, expecting an answer. The others seemed to look among themselves for a suitable reply. After the extended silence, Oishi glanced to the others.

"Well, didn't Fuji want to see how Ochibi was doing?" Oishi suggested to the others, as if looking for confirmation.

"Yeah, it was Fuji!" Momo-chan-senpai affirmed.

"Saa," Fuji pouted, "you all wanted to see if he got the tip after the first night. Oh. Did you ever get our tip, Ochibi?"

Tip? No, Ryoma had received no such tip. They were in Japan, he felt like informing them. He had been there long enough to understand why, too. It just wasn't done. It was insulting, Minato and Ryo said. And suddenly, Ryoma was reminded of the gift card. It annoyed him now.

"I have a name, you know," Ryoma said instead of biting their heads off for trying to tip him. Ryoma wasn't sure where that had come from. He'd never had a problem with the nickname, but it seemed that everything was getting on his nerves tonight.

He tersely nodded to them and removed himself from their presence before he could let his bad mood rub off on them. As he was retreating to the kitchen, he thought there was no reason for them to have tipped him. His service had been downright terrible the first time he had met them, and still, they came back? It occurred to him that *Fuji*, the genius who would be most likely to notice Ryoma's talent, had suggested they go back. To check on him. Not to eat, *for him*. And last time, they admitted that they never came there for the food. Why? What was it about him that attracted Seigaku's greatest tennis players? Ryoma feared the answer. He feared Yukimura was right.

He helped one of the other waiters clean the kitchen and glanced back out at their booth. They were talking amongst themselves. Again. He had let Jackal follow him before only so he could interrogate the boy about what Seigaku said when he wasn't there. And he had promptly put Jackal's words to the back of his mind. Oh, but now they were coming to the forefront. They thought he was in some kind of danger, though Ryoma had no idea what it could be. They thought Oishi was doing a better job than Yukimura at something, but what stood out most was that they wanted him... on their team. Yukimura had been right about one thing. What else was he right about?

Ryoma purposefully marched back to their table. "This is yours," Ryoma pulled his wallet out and laid down the gift card. "I can appreciate gifts. But not charity."

He didn't want to hear their excuses, their voices. He left quickly. There was someone else who could lock up the restaurant for the night. For now, Ryoma just wanted to go to a place where he he wasn't pushed to question everybody's motives.

A last ditch effort. "Why won't you go with me?" Ryoma pleaded with her. What would his mother do without him? Would she continue to take her medicine? Why did she want to stay when they were being offered a free hotel room in New York City?

"I'll be fine with Ryuzaki-sensei," she said serenely, happily, continuing her packing. She folded her clothes with all the grace and gentleness Ryoma had associated with the word, 'mother.' But he didn't want her with Ryuzaki-san. He wanted her with him, away from Seigaku.

He was still trying to talk her into leaving with him as they were walking toward Ryuzaki's threshold. His mother rapped on the door, and put her ear on the wood in a childish move.

"Hello?" a girl with two braids asked as she opened the door. Kaa-san almost fell into her before catching herself with a laugh.

"Echizen-san, are you okay?" He remembered seeing this girl somewhere. He wasn't sure where.

"Ryuzaki-san?" his mother inquired, smiling.

"Ah, just call me Sakuno, Echizen-san!" she said politely in a soft voice. "After all, we'll be spending a lot of time together."

She seemed nothing like the Seigaku regulars. Ryoma's first thought was that she was demure. And mindful of others.

"Won't you come in? My grandmother will be back from the convenient store soon." She opened the door wider to a conservatively furnished home. Ryoma and his mother toed their shoes off while the girl wheeled the lone suitcase to the living room. "Um, my grandma said you'd know where your room is, upstairs, third-"

"Yes, I remember, third door to the left. Thank you, Sakuno-chan. Ryoma, why don't you stay here and get to know Sakuno?" His Kaa-

san nudged him with her elbow and took her single suitcase and with strength Ryoma never knew she had, lifted it with her as she ascended the stairs. He wanted to follow, to help her, to do something. Anything but stand there with a strange girl.

"So," she looked awkward, trying to make conversation, "Where are you flying, Echizen-kun?" Didn't she know?

"Don't you hang out with the regulars?" he asked her instead.

She shook her head. "Not really. I've cheered for them sometimes, but the girls' tennis team never practices with the boys'."

"You play tennis?" That hair must get in the way, Ryoma thought to say, but decided otherwise. Why fill the silence with meaningless chatter? He didn't actually care whether her long braids got in the way of her game.

Sakuno nodded. "Actually, I-" she smiled bashfully and started fiddling with her hands. "You don't remember me, do you?"

Ryoma shook his head. He rarely remembered people's names unless properly introduced, and he didn't recognize her at all.

"Um, you helped me out at the diner where you work. There was a guy. With a racket."

Oh, how had Ryoma forgotten? He remembered the encounter clearly enough. "Were you there to eat with the regulars?" he asked. So she did know them. But she was with them only once. He had never seen her in the restaurant again.

"My grandma wanted me to get some papers to them since she was busy. They're a very... lively group. As soon as I sat down, they wouldn't let me go until we'd had a long in depth conversation about nothing particularly important."

It sounded like them. Ryoma almost laughed.

"Sakuno, will you help me?" a voice called from the front door. Ryoma turned around to see the old woman. It was strange seeing her in normal clothes, a t-shirt and jeans. He had only ever seen her in a pink jogging suit and a bikini. Ryoma shuddered at the memory.

"Sure, Grandma," she responded promptly. Ryoma followed her but picked up the plastic bags before the girl could touch them. "I've got them," he said, "Where do they go?"

"Just the kitchen, Ryoma, over there," the woman nodded to her left. He paused. Had she ever called him Ryoma? At the camp, had she ever called him by his name?

He left the bags on a counter and looked with questioning eyes toward the old lady. She returned his glance levelly and then called, "Sakuno." The girl was quick, just as Ryoma expected a tennis player to be. "Take these books up to Echizen-san and show her around the second floor. Things have changed since she was last here." Sakuno nodded obediently and carefully took the two novels with her.

"Now," she turned to Ryoma, "You haven't told my boys that you're leaving today, have you?"

Ryoma stiffened. He didn't back down, though. "No. My flight is in a few hours, so I'll be going now." If she asked for an explanation, Ryoma wouldn't give it. He didn't think he'd be able to express his thoughts coherently if he wanted.

"Then may I tell them that you've left?"

He paused and nodded. It was thoughtful of her. "Please," he answered. He had manners when he wanted. He walked to the door and sat down to put his shoes back on.

"Ryoma..." Ryuzaki-sensei looked at him with longing eyes. She sighed. "I remember when you were just a child. You were so much cuter than Nanjiroh ever was."

That caught him off guard, but he never took his eyes off of his shoelace-tying. "You knew Oyaji? My dad?" Is that why the Seigaku regulars had warmed up to him?

"Knew him?" She laughed, "I was his coach. You were probably too young to remember. Nanjiroh brought you and Rinko here while he was looking for that relative of your mother's."

"But you've only ever coached at Seigaku, right?" Ryoma asked as he stood up and looked at the old woman. Did that mean-

Ryuzaki-sensei laughed again. "Nanjiroh was one of the best players Seigaku has ever seen, though his backhand was worse than a beginner's! He led our team to win the Nationals three years straight." She sighed and smiled, opening the front door for him. "Oh, but you're very good too. Not quite there yet..."

"Mada mada," Ryoma paused, "daze. Mada mada daze. That's what he used to say."

The woman chuckled. "Yep, Nanjiroh was always great fun. He'd be so proud, seeing you now. A strong, independent boy. Oh, but I didn't send Sakuno upstairs so we could talk about this." Why *did* she send her granddaughter upstairs? Ryuzaki-sensei stepped outside onto the porch and closed the door behind her. "Ryoma, I just want to tell you not to worry. I majored in mathematics and psychology, and I know Rinko, her circumstances quite well. It's the summer, so Sakuno will be home keeping her company. After all, I'm sure it's been a while since your mother's had some girl time. Enjoy yourself at the U.S. Open, okay?"

Of all the things he thought she would say, well, this wasn't even the last. It wasn't even on the list of things he had thought she would say. All that mattered was that his mother stay safe. "She needs to take her medicine, and sometimes she asks where Oyaji is. Can you promise me that she'll be okay?" Can you promise me that she won't act on her darkest thoughts, and that no one else will hurt her?

"Yes, I can. But won't you wait and say good bye to your mother?"

"It's only a week or two," Ryoma reasoned both for her and himself. He didn't want a long teary good bye, because then he wouldn't be able to tear himself away from her side, even though they both knew that he needed to go. At base, he only needed one thing. "Ryuzaki-sensei, I'm relying on you to keep her safe."

"I will."

Ryoma nodded. "That's all I ask."

"Echizen Ryoma."

"Kiriara."

Men and women in business suits and teenagers in jeans dashed past them. The entire world was in its normal frenzy of dynamic motion except for the two boys standing in everybody's way. One man sneered at the punks and had to maneuver around them and a flight attendant looked around worriedly, as if she wondered whether she needed to remove them and their standoff from the premises. Kiriara, breathing heavily from finally finding him at the airport, wouldn't budge though. He was going to get Echizen talking.

"So you're finally running away, is that it? Took you long enough," he said angrily. He was the only one to seek Echizen out after reading the letter, to track the boy down at the Narita airport. Everyone else had gone quiet and continued training for the Nationals. But he could tell that some of the regulars were uncomfortable with letting the boy go without a few words. Kiriara probably should've stayed for the rest of practice, but he needed answers.

Echizen shrugged. Kiriara did not come all the way there to watch the boy shrug.

"You're so weak, aren't you?" The boy was walking away. "Hey, I'm talking to you!" Kiri-hara stepped in front of him, his nose less than a foot away from Echizen's. What was wrong with the boy? He had read the letter. Rather, Yagyu had translated most of the letter for him. In print, Echizen had seemed so... strong, so independent and well, superior. It was maddening.

Echizen continued on his merry way, but Kiri-hara wanted a response, the kind he'd expect from the kid with an attitude. He grabbed the boy's collar and spun him around, only to have a cold hand seize his wrist. There was no violence, no flipping or punching, just a simple warning hold. Kiri-hara slowly let go of the boy's shirt and Echizen did the same.

"We don't follow Sanada-fukubuchou blindly," Kiri-hara stated. He didn't know why that was his first thought or why that accusation, out of everything else, stood out to him.

"Blindly following Yukimura is just as bad. Or worse." What did that mean?

Kiri-hara scrunched up his face in anger, confusion. "There is no blindness. We follow Yukimura-buchou because he'll lead us to victory. We'll be respected, feared! We want to win and leave behind a great legacy, we want to prove that we've worked hard for the glory. I thought you were the same." Echizen was very much like them when he wanted to be. Echizen wanted respect and glory. Kiri-hara had seen him fight for it.

"I guess I'm not."

No! Echizen was not going to leave it there! "But you were! I saw you playing against that Fuji guy, and you were like-"

"Is there a point to this? I need to go."

"God dammit!" Kiri-hara was tired of Echizen's flippant attitude. He wanted a solid, serious conversation. "What makes Seigaku more

desirable than Rikkaidai? Rikkai has everything, the greatest players, the reputation, the Nationals at our fingertips-why would you ever say that you were playing for *Seigaku's* buchou? You can't mean to say that their captain has been just as much of a captain as Yukimura-buchou!"

"Why not?" Echizen challenged. The boy took a step forward, and Kirihara had the feeling that the boy was towering over him even though he was at least three inches taller than the kid. "What if I said that Tezuka-buchou was a better captain and senpai to me than Yukimura? Seigaku has been a more supportive team than Rikkai could ever be! After everything you put me through, only they were there to help me." Echizen looked surprised at his own words.

Kirihara didn't get it. What he did was never so bad. So he locked him up in the tennis clubhouse *once*, Echizen had gotten out fine. Sure he had encouraged the others to tease him, but Kirihara had done nothing but stand by, just like everyone else. Echizen couldn't blame it all on him. It was just as much Echizen's fault for being socially stunted. "Yukimura-buchou says they're just using you." And Yukimura had told him in confidence, but it was something Echizen needed to know. And it would show the brat that Seigaku was no better than Rikkaidai.

But it seemed Echizen already knew. Because the boy withdrew and pulled his white cap down. "Even if that were the case," Kirihara could hear the doubt in the boy's voice, "I would still owe them for helping me keep my sanity through it all."

It wasn't that bad! Kirihara scoffed to himself, feeling uncomfortable. *Or was it?*

However, he couldn't see the other boy's eyes, and for some reason, he felt that if he could, he'd only see the foggy hazel. "Even if they were just using me," he took a calm breath, "I would still be thankful that they were there at all. I would cut my ties without hate and never look back."

What kind of treatment engendered such conflicted emotions on a decision that should be easy? Even in the face of their possible manipulation, Echizen admitted that he couldn't hate them. He still thought Seigaku was better than Rikkaidai. Kirihara didn't think he could abide by someone if he knew that person was exploiting him. But Echizen could not hate those at Seigaku as he hated Rikkai. Echizen had no harsh words for them.

Kirihara didn't know how to phrase his jumbled thoughts. Nor had he an idea as to what led him to ask in such a lost voice, "How can you still-how can you?"

Echizen himself seemed unsure. But he answered the impossible question anyway. "I can't believe that everything they did was fake. And it seemed that most of the time, they just wanted me to be happy." Echizen looked thoughtful, as if he had discovered something. He looked up into Kirihara's conflicted gaze, and Kirihara could see that the boy's eyes had lost their haze. There was no doubt, was there? If there had been any, it had been dispelled by voicing his thoughts aloud.

The boy smirked. "Even Yukimura couldn't bring himself to pretend to be so nice, and he obviously has practice in scheming."

Yukimura? Buchou never did such a thing. He only ever wanted to live, play tennis, and win. Yukimura-buchou did whatever was best for the team in the long run, and never had he veered away from his caring character. Well, it was Echizen's loss. It was his own fault, the traitor, that Yukimura's protection wasn't enough to keep him at Rikkai. "Echizen," he needed a reaction, some kind of emotion. Echizen was running away, right? Kirihara was still with Rikkai, he was on top, right? He'd got what he wanted. Right? "You know I've won, then."

It seemed like the world around them paused for the time it took for Kirihara to realize that Echizen didn't see the situation the same way. The boy in the white hat seemed content, as if Kirihara was nothing. Kirihara was just a bug under his Fila Mids.

The kid smiled. It wasn't even a smirk. Just a simple, sincere smile. "You'd like to think that, wouldn't you?"

"So here's your hotel, and the stadium in Flushing Meadows where you'll be playing isn't too far away. Any questions?" The man was nice and all, but altogether too loud. Maybe it was an American thing.

Ryoma had only one burning question, and he hoped he'd get a good answer. "Why me?"

The man laughed a loud boisterous laugh, and clapped a hand on Ryoma's back. "You realize you were entitled to play some really big tournaments in Europe after your junior championships, right?" Ryoma nodded. He had been invited, but he had had other priorities. The tournament committees or whatever didn't pay for the flight or the hotel, and his mother had been eager to go back to Japan. The organizers of the US Open were more generous.

"To think, Samurai Nanjiroh's son!" Ryoma tensed. "The association didn't want you dropping out of the professionals like your father. You were more than qualified anyway. Actually, we had been working on getting you here for more than a year. Took a bit of convincing, since you're so young."

How much of this was because of Nanjiroh? "Why didn't anyone contact me during that time?" He thought they'd at least tell him what they were planning. This guy, the man who had stood at the airline for apparently three hours holding up a sign with Ryoma's name on it, was a complete stranger.

"That's what the problem was! You seemed to drop off the face of the earth, until your name started circulating on internet forums and among other teams and you little bugger you, you dominated the high school scene!"

Ryoma didn't think he was comfortable with the familiarity of this guy.

"You'll be the youngest person to win the US open, of a Grand Slam Title! What an honor," the man started talking to himself. "Though not the youngest to compete. How long ago did you turn fifteen?"

Ryoma had tuned the older man out in favor of petting Karupin. Really, he had no idea how she had stowed away. He would need to call his mother sometime soon. Oh, and Seigaku. He needed to call them.

"Mr. Echizen!"

He inclined his head toward the man. "Hm?"

"Your birthday?"

"December twenty-fourth. Why?"

"So if you win, you'll be..." the man paused, scrunched up his face, and counted on his fingers a bit, "fifteen years, eight months and however many days old, not the youngest competitor. Still, imagine if you won it! Well, I'll leave you to your own devices. Make good choices!" The man said his words quickly and efficiently and almost slammed the door behind himself.

The silence was sudden, but Ryoma preferred it over noise any day. But he had a lot of time to do nothing. He could practice. He could go shopping. Or he could call the Seigaku regulars and straighten things out; he had Ryuzaki-sensei's number. Contrary to what he told Kiri-hara, he *had* left them on a sour note. And now that he had time to think, twelve and a half hours to think, did it really make sense that they were using him? He remembered seeing Yukimura's conviction, but then... that was how Yukimura thought. Yukimura knew only manipulation and Machiavellian tactics. Could he trust anything Yukimura said? No. Could he trust the Seigaku regulars, the people he had considered his only real friends? Ryoma found that he really wanted to. Really, *really* wanted to. He could call them and have an honest conversation without having to see them. A straightforward

conversation with no secrets, and everything out in the open. He could call them.

No.

If it was one in the afternoon here... then, Ryoma did some quick math, it would be two in the morning there. He could call later. Yeah, maybe when they'll actually be awake.

Well, he could train. He could see the sights. He walked to the lobby, to the business area, and quickly made use of the computers. Could he email them? It occurred to him that they never exchanged any forms of communication. He was sure that he only used his email address for important things, though. Like medical journals: that Harvard Medical, The National Academy of the Sciences, some German medical journal that occasionally had articles in English, and just resources in general. He wanted to know any advances made; it was a disease famous in the public eye. Surely there would be a cure or *something* someday...

Oh, but what was this? One new email. From someone at Rikkaidai. Had he ever given someone his email address? He glanced at the subject and sender. It could stand to wait a few hours.

Ryoma wasn't sure it was safe to be walking around this area of New York. Frankly, he didn't care much, and it was mid-morning, hardly the time for violent crime. The food around here was delicious, what with the Puerto Rican influence, and he wasn't going to sacrifice his satisfaction for safety. This area wasn't as bad as some would assume. Sure, there was graffiti on the bricks (where in New York was there not graffiti?) and random guys hitting tennis balls against them, but if anything, that was a sign of some culture. Tennis was often seen as a country club sport anyway.

He turned to see who was hitting the ball against the brick. The ball looked heavier than usual, and the man's swings seemed heavier as well. Like his racket was catching the tennis ball and hurling it back.

Finally, the ball burst, spilling smaller black balls. Hm. Ryoma walked up to the chain link fence and frowned. The man holding the racket looked familiar. Terribly familiar.

"Interesting..." he said to himself.

"Long time no see!" a familiar voice rang in the New York air. Obviously, it wasn't directed to him, since he didn't know anyone from New York, but he did wonder who this guy was talking to. The man turned around. "Chibisuke." The guy was talking to him?

Ryoma didn't know him. The voice tickled his ears, only because it sounded familiar. And the man's hair was the same shade of dark brown as Ryoma's own parents.

"You don't remember, Chibisuke?"

Next chapter: Echizen vs. Echizen

Echizen vs Echizen

Chapter Twelve: Echizen vs Echizen

Scenes flashed in his mind, memories he thought long forgotten. A nice two-story house, big and spacious just for three people and barely a fourth. He had been young. There was a cliff. And oranges. " *You*," Ryoma muttered, looking at a boy who could be his identical twin if the man were younger. He remembered a boy with brown hair and brown eyes, but now... but now he looked like Ryoma himself.

"Me! Almost thought you wouldn't recognize your aniki!" The man, because he definitely was no longer a boy, slung an arm around Ryoma's neck just to annoy him. Ryoma glared at him and wished he had worn his hat today. It was just too weird that they looked so alike. The hat was purely Ryoma's though, a simple distinguishing accessory.

He was digging his knuckles into Ryoma's head like a big brother ought to, but Ryoma couldn't stand it.

"Where were you!" he almost shouted. *How are you here? Why did I have to find you of all people?* He didn't want to make a scene, and there were people sitting outside a café nearby who were already looking at them surreptitiously. Ryoma stalked off, not wanting to see his older doppelganger.

"Whoa, whoa, little bro, what's gotten into you? Chillax!" his 'brother' said in English as he practically picked Ryoma up. Ryoma started shouting this time, more because of the indignity of being thrown over his brother's shoulder fireman style than because of anything else. People looked on, yes, but many were snickering and laughing, understanding it to be a brotherly dispute, nothing serious.

He unloaded Ryoma after walking a ways, making sure the boy had his feet on the ground before letting go completely. "Welcome, to my

humble abode," Ryoga said with a dramatic sweep of his arms around the dilapidated warehouse.

Ryoma straightened his shirt out and crossed his arms, sending a glare at his half brother. "At least I know you've been just as miserable as me," Ryoma muttered, looking at the crates and boxes and the sunlight filtering in through dirty windows high above.

"Miserable?" he scoffed. "I've been on my own since I was twelve, while you've been living in the lap of luxury your entire life." Ryoga laughed. Even when he was being bitter, he couldn't be serious.

Ryoma looked at him, just looked. It had been ten years since then. Ryoga was most definitely an adult, though Ryoma couldn't tell what kind of adult he had become. Was he successful? Was he satisfied? Was he as miserable as Ryoma? But Ryoga, ever the avoidant one, quickly changed the subject. "So what's going on in LA?" he asked, shifting dusty boxes around the warehouse.

"I wouldn't know. I've been in Japan for the past year."

"Whoo!" Ryoga exclaimed, genuinely surprised, "That must've been a culture shock. Must be hard giving respect to all your elders since you're such a brat," he teased. There was some truth in it, though. The last time he had called anyone captain to his face was when he was at the Seigaku-Rokkaku training camp, and before then... he couldn't remember. But Ryoma wouldn't dignify the question with an answer.

"Your old man must be pretty happy being back in the land of the samurai. I haven't heard a thing about him-"

"He's dead."

Ryoma didn't know why he just said it flat out. Maybe because he was naturally tactless. Or maybe because he was frustrated. Ryoga had been missing, and although there was no way he could have known, Ryoma was mad that the man hadn't tried to contact them.

"And he didn't leave me any money? The jerk," Ryoga chuckled drily. "Though I couldn't expect him to. It's not like I was his kid anyway."

Ryoma could read between the lines if he wanted to, but he didn't feel like tolerating Ryoga's aloofness right now. Was there any love at all between Ryoga and their father? Ryoma decided that yes, there had been something. Maybe camaraderie or at least respect. Whatever it was, there had been a connection that had died without Ryoga realizing it.

"We didn't know where you were," Ryoma said simply. He didn't know why he had bothered with a search, short-lived as it was. His mother hadn't wanted to see him-Ryoga's very existence reminded her of how her husband died, Ryoma thought. Why else would she avoid him?

"Yeah, well, I planned it that way. Didn't think he'd kick the bucket so soon."

Ryoma almost winced at the insensitive euphemism. Kick the bucket? Echizen Nanjiroh had done no such thing. He had clung to life as long as he could, but still allowed himself to die with a smile on his face.

They stood in the strange warehouse, stuffy yet empty, shadowy and gray.

"Why are you in Brooklyn, then?" Ryoga asked. It must have been a question his brother had stewing in his mind earlier. Should Ryoma tell him? Ryoga would be a great person to practice with. But he was an insensitive jerk. Even Ryoma wouldn't make fun of the dead.

"U.S. Open."

"Oho, my little bro is hitting the pros!" Ryoma ducked as the man tried to mess up his hair.

Ryoma couldn't stand it. This was not a man, he thought. This was a child possessing the body of a man. No adult could be this careless and irresponsible. "I'm leaving. Don't bother trying to contact us."

"Oi, Chibisuke!" Ryoga jogged to catch up with him. "Let's hang out, yeah? Just a little?"

Ryoma wasn't sure what made him even bother to look up to those identical eyes. Well, not so identical. The shape was the same for them both, but the color he saw... brown. Probably from Ryoga's mother. Echizen Rinko's eyes were brown, but Echizen Nanjiroh's were a glowing hazel, the color that Ryoma now had. But Ryoga, cocky, lazy Ryoga, must have had more color from his mother.

"I'm busy," Ryoma said, turning around.

"Doing what?"

"Leaving."

Ryoga grabbed his elbow, turning his little brother around. Looking down, he adopted a serious look. "Really, Chibisuke, it's been far too long. Would it be so bad just to catch up?"

He looked sincere. For once in his life, Echizen Ryoga looked sincere. Far be it from Ryoma to discourage sincerity from his half brother. "Fine," he said apathetically. If it turned out to be a bust, Ryoma could always just slink away. Being small was a good thing sometimes.

"I'm leaving. Really."

"Just once! C'mon, sometimes I don't think you were ever a child, Chibisuke!" Ryoga whined.

"You've got more than enough childishness for the both of us. Let me go."

Ryoma wondered why he thought that would work. From previous experience, he should have run at that precise moment. Ryoga had no qualms about picking him up *again* and dumping him on the lacquered wood.

Now, Ryoma had had no problem when Ryoga took a taxi all the way down to the Brooklyn bridge and then up toward Central Park instead of taking a more direct route which would have taken half the time. He hadn't put up a fuss when Ryoga insisted on visiting the zoo, of all places, in Central Park. But when Ryoga dragged him to the ticket booth of the carousel, Ryoma rebelled.

And boy, didn't that work well, Ryoma thought sarcastically with his arms crossed. At least Ryoga really couldn't position him on one of the horses-how embarrassing that would be. He plopped himself down into one of the carriages, so he could retain at least a little dignity.

"You're too serious," Ryoga commented. It wasn't really a complaint, more like an observation.

"And you're too immature."

"I, good sir, am fun-loving," he said, putting his hands behind his head. Ryoma rolled his eyes. Ryoga acted too much like Oyaji. Ryoma refused to look at the other boy and so settled on studying the wrought iron fence. Little black horse heads adorned the fence, a nice sophisticated touch to the fancy, multi-colored merry-go-round.

A sigh.

Ryoma ignored his brother and took his eyes away from the iron horses. The carousel was beginning to move.

Another sigh. A longer, more drawn out sigh.

Ryoma gave the older boy a sideways glance and noted that he was doing the same. "What do you want?" Ryoma finally asked,

uncrossing his arms.

"Well, I figured this was a good place to talk about the sadder matters," Ryoga said.

Ryoma didn't want to talk about the sadder matters. He abruptly stood.

"Wait, Ryoma," he called. Ryoma looked down at him, startled by the use of his real name.

"Well, c'mon, sit."

"Don't wanna."

"Fine, then stand."

"Then I will."

Sigh.

Ryoga scratched his temple, as if he didn't know where to start. Finally, he seemed to come upon the words: "You doing it for the money?" And promptly scrunched up his nose and scratched his head, as if those weren't the words he had been looking for.

At first, Ryoma didn't know what he was talking about. But it came to him quickly. "You mean the U.S. Open?"

"No, the sex." Pause. "Of course the U.S. Open, what else could I be talking about?"

Ryoma didn't think the man should've expected him to read his mind. "No, of course it's not for the money," he lied. But really, was there a reason to do it other than for money? He voiced his thought slowly, deliberately. "But you. You probably need the money. Why don't you ever enter tournaments?"

"It'd be no fun."

Fun? Ha! How ridiculous. Ryoma snorted and crossed his arms again. "You don't think I'm having fun?" Ryoma asked drily.

It was a rhetorical question, but Ryoga answered anyway. "No, I don't."

Ryoma wilted and just leaned against the side of the carriage, turning his eyes away from Ryoga and toward the healthy light beyond the roof of the carousel.

"Did you ever have fun?" Ryoga asked him.

Ryoma wondered. Did he? His mind wandered away from the zoo and landed in Japan. Of course he'd had fun. "Of course," he muttered. There was the game against Tezuka that one time. And toward the beginning of the game with Fuji before the rain ruined it all. Those were fun games. He tried to latch onto any other memories of having fun, but they all slipped away. "I played a few great games." And then there were games against Oyaji. The old man always seemed to be happy playing Ryoma, even when Ryoma hadn't been very good. The man, now dead, always seemed to have fun. But Ryoma only ever wanted to win against Oyaji. What would've happened if he had let himself just *play* against Oyaji? Just once? Did he have a single memory of just *playing* ?

"I bet! I heard from an old friend that the Japanese Nationals would be awesome. I guess your team won, huh? Never could take losing easily," Ryoga said with a fond shake of the head.

Ryoma pursed his lips. It felt like Ryoga was taunting him on purpose. Didn't he know that the Nationals were next week? The same time as the second week of the U.S. Open? Didn't he know that it killed him that he wouldn't be playing with a team, even Rikkaidai? Didn't that-that *bastard* know that the last thing he wanted to do was abandon everything? "You're a bastard." He walked toward the edge of the carousel and easily stepped off. It wasn't going that fast anyway. The gate was securely closed until the carousel stopped, but he thought he could easily jump the iron.

"Whoa, Chibisuke, wait up!" Ryoga stepped off the merry-go-round. "What'd I do?" He really had no idea, Ryoma realized. Ryoga was just that clueless.

"I'm missing the Nationals. Also, my team was killing me. Almost literally."

"Huh?" Ryoga then put on that cunning little hat and with a not-so-subtle sardonic voice, said, "Oh, but it shouldn't matter, right? After all, you ran away from your team anyway." He put an arm around Ryoma's shoulder and started guiding him back to the carousel, only to be thwarted since the carriage had moved on. "And it's not like you're here just for the money. "

Yes, he finally admitted. He actually was there for the money. It was the responsible thing to do. He would much rather be playing tennis against his peers and winning those matches. Frankly, the U.S. Open itself could stand to wait a few years. The Nationals, well, he could only go to the Nationals with a team once. Then the next year, the team would be drastically different. And then the next year... he'd be in college, wouldn't he? Then he could go after the U.S. Open. But his team... they wouldn't take him back, and he wouldn't want to go back to them. Never.

"What do you want from me?" Ryoma finally asked, exasperated and drained. He had not come to New York expecting to have his long lost brother give him a lecture about how to be irresponsible.

Ryoga seemed to consider his words, putting a thoughtful hand on his chin as if he were stroking an imaginary goatee. "I want..." he paused for dramatic effect, but that only made Ryoma more irritated, "to finish our ride on the carousel and then see the rest of the zoo." He jumped back onto the carousel just as the carriage came into view.

Ryoma rolled his eyes. If that's what it would take to get away from this topic of discussion, then he'd suffer through it.

Ryoma stood by the carriage Ryoga was sitting in for the remainder of the ride. It wasn't *completely* unpleasant, especially since it only lasted a few more seconds.

Ryoga had too much energy, Ryoma scientifically concluded as he watched the man-child run ahead of him around the zoo. Ryoma himself was enjoying the outing, looking at all the creatures that he never had time to appreciate. Such wonderful, majestic animals. He looked down the path to see Ryoga standing, not running, not talking to anyone, just standing. Ryoma took his time in catching up to Ryoga, who by that time was squatting and studying something in his hands. He wondered how the man would react to being pounced on, but as he snuck toward his half brother, he directed his eyes at whatever had captured his attention so.

Blood. Such red blood.

Drops. Just one or two, really.

But Ryoma still jumped back, startling the other boy.

"You're bleeding!" Ryoma exclaimed, looking at the red on his finger.

"Yeah, so? I'm trying to stop the blood flow. It wasn't a huge nick anyway," Ryoga said, showing him the small cut. But it was no small cut to Ryoma. It was still blood. He took another step back.

"What, you scared of blood, Chibisuke?" Ryoga laughed, holding out that menacing finger.

Was it like Oyaji's blood? The blood of their father, Ryoma feared. He looked with horror at the blood, that wretched life-giving water, and stood his ground. "Don't go near me," he ordered.

Ryoga laughed. "C'mon, Chibisuke, a little blood never hurt anyone," Ryoga chuckled. Yeah right, Ryoma thought.

"Tell that to Oyaji," coldly uttered Ryoma.

Ryoga's smile wasn't so much cold as it was unrelenting. "It wasn't the blood that got him, kiddo." Those eyes didn't allow Ryoma the luxury of looking away. They drew him in. "You know that, right?"

"Did you ever like Oyaji?" Ryoma asked him instead of answering.

The bleeding had finally come to a small beading on his finger, which Ryoga promptly sucked up like a vampire. "Him? As a rival, sure I liked the old man. As a father... he was never my father, was he? Any kid's gonna be bitter if his long lost parent turned out to have the perfect family already. Especially if said parent wished the said kid never existed."

"Oyaji never felt that way," he said with conviction. Oyaji had treasured both of them, though Ryoma hadn't realized it until he had to lean over to hear the man's feeble voice. He had wasted too many years showing only disdain to the man and regretted it. Did Ryoga's grudge still extend to the dead man?

"Was I talking about your dear Oyaji? Naw, I was talking about your-Rinko. She hated me."

Ryoma didn't know what he was talking about. Kaa-san never spent all that much time with Ryoga. She had only ever been sweet to both of them whenever she was near anyway. "She never hated you," Ryoma said, sure that Ryoga was just being his overdramatic self.

"Yeah, if you keep saying it to yourself, it'll come true, believe you me." The bitterness in his voice was startling. Ryoma didn't get it. Ryoma didn't get any of it.

"It's not like you ever tried getting to know her," Ryoma said. He didn't mean to sound accusing, but he had heard his words and winced. Yep, they sounded pretty accusatory.

Ryoga looked frustrated. He was running an impatient hand through his hair. "Listen, the woman who gave birth to me-

"Your mother?" Ryoma said humorlessly, not knowing why they were suddenly talking about Ryoga's mother.

"Call her what you will. I never called her *mother*," Ryoga almost spat. "She didn't want me at all, and I have no idea why I stayed as long as I did."

"What're you talking about?" Ryoma thought he'd gotten used to Ryoga not making sense. Ryoga looked down at him and shrugged. "Oh well," he said flippantly. Ryoma could tell that the man still wasn't comfortable. He was on edge, irritated. Something about their conversation really got to him. "No reason to get all bogged down by this kind of stuff. C'mon, I'll buy you an ice cream."

Ryoga followed him to his hotel, but Ryoma didn't mind so much, since the man wasn't pestering him and he'd otherwise have to stay in that warehouse. He walked to the business lounge area where the computers were and decided he needed to read that email someday. He was not putting off calling the Seigaku regulars. After all, the time zones were funky. He signed in, the same unread message in bold.

He didn't even know the person who sent it. He just knew that the domain name was the one given to all Rikkaidai high school students and the local part read *Urayama.s* He couldn't remember a single person with that name. Of course, his scope was limited to the tennis club and his class, but surely he'd remember if he ever gave his personal email to someone. Ryoma himself never used the Rikkai address provided for him. He only ever got hate mail there anyway.

Oh, what was this? It was an attachment. He skimmed over the body of the email, which said very little with too many words. However, a few sentences caught his eye; apparently an anonymous visitor came to Rikkai and challenged... Sanada. Ryoma's eyes went down to where the words, "Good luck at the Open! -Urayama Shiita," were, and he finally remembered the timid redheaded kid. What did he think he was doing in sending an email to him? They hadn't

exchanged one word since Urayama got into Rikkai. Though, Ryoma would admit, it was probably mostly his fault.

He read over the first paragraph again-it was all about how much he'd miss Ryoma-and then the second paragraph-everyone was going about normally, but there was something weird since Ryoma left-and the third-an entire paragraph of rambling questions, like what's the weather like in New York, or why aren't you coming back after you win the Open-the fourth-which was the longest and gave a detailed account on a mysterious challenger in a short-sleeved hoodie-and the last, which was a welcome relief and was really just a sentence. *Good luck at the Open!*

"Wow, my Chibisuke's getting fanmail!" Ryoga said, digging his knuckles into Ryoma's hair.

"Leave me alone," Ryoma said as he fished out an extra card key to his hotel room. "Go crazy. There are two beds. Take the empty one, and don't do anything to my cat." He right-clicked the attachment. According to the email, it was a short two minute video of the match. It would take a little while to load.

"Whoo! Such a classy place, thanks little bro," Ryoga crowed after messing up Ryoma's hair once more. He fled the room before Ryoma could take his revenge, encouraging a few of the people in the lobby to start gossiping about an asylum nearby.

The media player popped up and a low quality video, the size less than a fourth of the small-ish screen, started playing.

Ryoma snorted at whatever the opponent was wearing. Shorts, not too surprising since it was summer, and a weird hoodie with the hood up, which was surprising because what reason did he have to wear the hood anyway? Ryoma was ready to exit the media player; as the video started up, the score was apparently 4-0, Sanada in the lead, and he saw no redeeming value. But something kept him watching.

The audio wasn't good at all, what with the buzz of cheers from the students supporting Sanada, but Ryoma could still hear Sanada's insults, loud as they were. "You couldn't even make Nationals, and you think you can just waltz in here and challenge Rikkai?" Sanada scoffed, "Is this some kind of practical joke, Atobe?" Atobe, Atobe... hm.

They started battling for the next point, and as Sanada set up to the iron wall, the 'Mountain' of his Fuu Rin Ka Zan, Ryoma thought he saw the hooded boy's eyes flash. The ball zoomed past Sanada, landing right on his blind spot. Point to the challenger.

The net started loosening, and the camera zoomed in on Yukimura, Yukimura who was walking and standing, who seemed healthy, who was steadily undoing the net. "Alright, that's enough," the captain commanded. The camera zoomed out, and Ryoma thought he saw a self-satisfied smirk on the stranger's face.

Yukimura exchanged a few words with the mystery-player and turned away. There was no possible way to know what they were saying. Ryoma thought the video might've been taken on a cell phone. It would explain the bad quality of everything. The challenger left without making a fuss. Whoever was holding the camera shakily ran over to Yukimura without being too conspicuous.

"Why did you interfere?" Sanada accused Yukimura. It startled Ryoma. He had never seen Sanada use anything less than a civil tone with the captain.

Yukimura glanced at the camera and frowned, but turned to watch the stranger leave. "If you had continued," Yukimura prophesied, "The loser would have been you, Genichirou."

Yukimura turned to the camera holder. "What're you doing, Urayama?"

"Nothi-" And the video went dark.

It seemed there was talent in Japan that Ryoma had yet to encounter.

Fuji fingered the plastic card in his hands, wondering how the boy was faring. Echizen-kun was still in America, having already made it to the fourth round of the U.S. Open, and he hadn't contacted them once. He hadn't left on great terms, and it frustrated the genius. What happened? He had been dwelling on the confrontation for the past week, and he still didn't have an answer.

"Yo, Fujiko-chan!" Eiji sidled up to him and put an arm around his neck. Eiji was always so cheerful, it almost made Fuji's worries go away. Then Oishi joined them, as did Momoshiro.

"You all got the message too?" Fuji looked off in the distance to see Kaidoh coming up the sidewalk with Inui. And there, there was Kawamura crossing the street and bowing to a driver who had stopped to let him cross.

Eiji nodded vigorously, and bounded onto the porch. "I wonder why Ryuzaki-sensei wants us all here so late..." He knocked on the door and rang the doorbell twice in quick succession.

The door opened. "Kikumaru, you should be more patient."

"Tezuka!" Kikumaru would have leaped onto their captain if Tezuka had not almost closed the door again.

"Now, none of that. Come in."

None of them had ever stepped foot in Ryuzaki-sensei's home. It was weird, foreign. Fuji didn't bother looking at the furniture or the photographs sitting on the upright piano like the rest of them. He was watching Tezuka who picked up a phone that had been waiting on the table. He turned back to his teammates and gave them one guideline: "Don't be too loud."

Tezuka raised the phone to his ear. "I'm back." The person he was talking to had a quiet voice. "I've brought the other regulars with me. Hold on, I'll put you on speakerphone," Tezuka said as he pressed a button.

"What? No!"

"Ochibi!" almost all of them shout-whispered in surprise, trying to keep their voices down. Even over the phone, his voice wasn't hard to distinguish.

"Echizen-kun?" Fuji asked, sitting by the receiver. He remembered what the boy had said in the diner. He had a name.

"... yeah."

"How are you?" Fuji gestured for the rest of them to keep quiet as he kept a conversation going.

"I'm fine. Listen, about how I left-"

"You mean without telling anyone?" Fuji had his hand over Momoshiro's mouth to stop him from sounding like an idiot. He didn't want to scare the boy away, especially since it had taken a week to get in contact with him.

There was silence on the other end, and Fuji sent Momoshiro an open-eyed glare. The boy shrank away and moved behind Oishi just in case. "Ochibi," Fuji tried, "What about it?"

"I didn't mean to leave on such bad terms."

What was he trying to say? Surely, that wasn't an apology, was it? Echizen Ryoma, apologizing? Fuji thought he knew what Echizen-kun meant, but he had to have a little fun with it. "Oh? Is that an apology?"

"I never said that."

Fuji smiled to himself. Same old Ochibi.

Someone tapped Fuji on his shoulder and he turned his head to see Oishi. The boy looked like he wanted to say something. Fuji moved out of his way as the vice captain bent down to talk. "Are you okay, Echizen-kun? You didn't seem well at the diner."

There was a long silence. "*I don't understand you. Any of you,*" the grainy voice said. The eight of them stood there, just as confused as Echizen-kun seemed.

"What's not to understand?" It was Inui who asked. He'd be able to explain anything for him. There was silence on the other end.

"Why were you so nice to me?"

Fuji never considered it. Was it strange to Ochi- *Echizen-kun* that they were nice to him? What caused him to doubt them so greatly? He looked to the rest of his teammates who shared his concerned and baffled face.

"What do you mean, nice?" Let's define the terms, Fuji thought analytically.

"I know how I come off, okay?" He sounded upset. *"And I know that I'm hard to tolerate, but you guys helped me out and gave me a Christmas gift, you forgave me after that match with Fuji-what are you trying to do?"*

Oh, Echizen-kun was looking for an ulterior motive. Fuji looked to the other regulars, searching for an answer. He thought he could formulate a response, but he would need time to work out his thoughts. He glanced at his friends' pensive faces and figured they needed time too. Huh. Well, that's what stalling is for, Fuji thought. "Why shouldn't we do what we did?" Fuji knew there were several reasons against what they had done for Echizen-kun. But it would be interesting to hear his side.

"For one, it's expensive."

"Not that expensive. Try dividing it by eight." Fuji wondered if Echizen-kun was getting frustrated yet.

"But the cost is higher than whatever you're getting out of it. You're getting nothing from all this. You know, opportunity cost."

Fuji wondered when Echizen-kun had the time to crack open an economics book. "Whoever said that? What makes you think we didn't get anything from it?" Maybe this wasn't exactly stalling; this was actually getting to the heart of the issue.

" So you did get something from this whole thing. " He sounded both anxious and disappointed.

"Of course! Who does something for nothing?" There were no sounds from the other end. Fuji wasn't sure how long to let the boy stew in his silence. Better to allay his fears, Fuji figured. "Spending time with you is its own reward."

"Trite," Echizen-kun growled, *"Can't I get on the phone with someone else? Someone who makes sense?"* Fuji mocked hurt and told the kid so. Frankly, Echizen-kun didn't care and told him he didn't care, and Fuji found himself smiling again because of the boy's familiar blasé attitude.

Kikumaru slid over to the phone and complained loudly, "Ne, Ochibi-chan, you haven't even told us how America is!"

Silence. Then, *"The Central Park zoo is nice. And-"* What was he doing at the zoo?

On the other end, they could hear a scuffle of sorts, an argument. A thump. With a yawn, a different voice asked in English, *"Oh, are these Chibisuke's teammates?"* Distantly, they could hear Ochibi arguing with him, probably trying to get the phone back.

"Oi, you give the phone back to Ochibi!" Momo shouted, in heavily accented English.

"So you're the guys that made him leave? The jerks from his school?" the cocky guy wondered defensively in fluent Japanese. Some more wrestling was heard, and they all leaned in to hear who had managed to secure the phone.

"I gotta go. Maybe I'll call tomorrow." With that, he hung up.

Fuji exchanged confused expressions with his friends and concluded that little of that conversation had made sense. "What just happened?"

"Oh, is Ochibi in danger?" that was Taka who asked. It didn't seem like the other boy was a danger to him. If anything, he seemed protective of the boy. But who was he?

"No, I don't think so," a melodic voice floated out to them. They'd heard it before, once that Christmas Eve, and then in Chiba. They collectively turned to see Echizen-san, the sweet lady who had accompanied them on their training camp a week or so before. "That was my first son," she confessed, her eyes empty and limbs weak, as if just saying those words had taken every bit of strength she had.

"So that was your team?" Ryoga asked with a yawn, tossing a tennis ball up and down and teasing the cat. It was early. Too early.

Chibisuke looked at him blankly, unwilling to show his emotions when they'd only reunited for one day. "Not... not exactly." A pause. "No."

Ryoga lifted an eyebrow. "Then... who were they, if not the team you were talking about?" He had slept soundly and uninterrupted, a rare instance that was becoming more common as he stayed with Chibisuke, and woke to a variety of loud grainy voices. "And why are you just calling now?"

Chibisuke huffed. "I am not *just calling* now. I'd been talking to Tezuka-buchou for a few days, and he practically ambushed me with the team."

"Over the phone."

He barely dodged the pillow. "Yes, over the phone," Chibisuke muttered. He always seemed irritated lately.

From what he could piece together, the kid's own team was made up of jackasses, and this nameless group were his friends, probably from another school. Chibisuke wouldn't say another word on the matter. Not about *how* his teammates were jackasses or what they had done to deserve Chibisuke's ire (he didn't actually use that word, but the way the kid said 'differences in opinions and philosophies' and 'hard loyalties to keep' told Ryoga that there was much more to this than philosophy and loyalty).

"Well, who were they?" Ryoga asked again, realizing that Chibisuke had avoided the question altogether.

The kid fidgeted. Since when did he fidget? "They're friends."

"Who don't go to your school," Ryoga finished for him. He had deduced as much. Chibisuke wasn't the type to seek friends outside of his interests, and since tennis was his only interest, his friends would be made up of people from his tennis team. But his tennis team was full of jackasses. So who were these guys? Other tennis players? "Do they play tennis?" he asked innocently.

Chibisuke's eyes darted over to him. Okay, so Ryoga really couldn't pull off the whole 'innocent' look. "Yes, they play tennis," he answered evenly. So evenly that Ryoga could only suspect he was trying to hide his emotions. Chibisuke stood up and stretched. "Well, I'm going out to train before my match next week." The kid started throwing things into his tennis bag and walked around the hotel room looking for his wallet.

Oh, Ryoga could see it in his eyes, in the slump of his shoulders. He had seen it the first day at the zoo. He plopped down onto Ryoma's recently emptied bed. Deciding that this conversation would be easier without eye contact, he looked out the window as he asked, "Do you really need the million?"

He couldn't see the gears in his little brother's head turning, but he could hear the boy's movement halt.

"Do you need the glory?"

Chibisuke actually snorted at this and gave him a sidelong glance. Of course Chibisuke would find that ridiculous. Since when was he in it for the glory? The kid never once played for 'the glory,' and glory never entered his mind.

Ryoga went in for the kill. "Are you having fun?" It was an open question. Let Chibisuke take it as he liked.

The kid choked, whether on laughter or tears, Ryoga couldn't tell. He flipped over on the bed so he could observe his half brother. He was sitting on Ryoga's bed with Karupin lazing on his lap. He looked... skeptical, incredulous, the kind of humorous disbelief that usually accompanied the words, 'yeah right.'

He wanted to get inside the kid's head, because it was obvious he was thinking hard.

Ryoma almost laughed at him. *Fun? He was only playing against uptight pros, Americans, Spaniards, Russians, many players from other countries. None of them presented the challenge that he had faced in Japan which was ridiculous. He was playing high schoolers in Japan! What was the difference that made high school tennis better than the U.S. Open? Was there something in the water there?*

Playing Federer would be fun. Surely that would be fun. But Federer was in a completely different bracket, and Ryoma wouldn't face him until the Finals. Did he want to continue this all the way to the finals,

though? He couldn't imagine asking himself that question a week ago, because his answer would have been, 'Of course!' But now? Now...

The players in the States unconsciously used the Muga, so it made the play harder. But not nearly as... as fun as the matches he had when he was a kid. What, was he not a kid anymore?

He found himself missing Seigaku. They... sincerely cared about him, didn't they? And they always had fun. Even the mature ones in the group still managed to have fun. Ryoma was thinking of Tezuka, and the nonexistence of his smile. Just thinking about the stoic among the fun-loving teenagers made him smile to himself.

"Okay, well you seem to be having some fun in your head at least."

Chibisuke finally faced him head-on. "What are you trying to get at?"

Because it was obvious to Chibisuke that Ryoga was trying to drive home some point. Ryoga wasn't very good at being subtle, and he would never claim to be. "You obviously don't want to be here, so why are you?"

Chibisuke lifted his bag over one shoulder and placed his white cap on his head. "What would you rather have me do?" It felt like they'd already had this conversation.

C'mon, what kind of question was that? How was Ryoga, the high school dropout, the runaway, supposed to have the answers? And why were the kid's shoulders slumping again? Being around Chibisuke only made him sad. So, what would he have Echizen Ryoma do? He shrugged in response.

Chibisuke rolled his eyes, probably getting annoyed at his shrugging. He walked over to the door, his fingers lightly brushing the handle.

Ryoga looked at the kid from the corner of his eye. "I suppose you *could*... naw, that's stupid."

Chisibuke crossed his arms and gave him a bored look. "What."

He stalled. Better let him wait and endure the suspense! "Well, maybe... no, it would be impossible..."

"Okay, I'll be back at eight. Get your own lunch somehow." The door clicked as Chibisuke shut it behind him.

"Oi, wait!"

Next chapter: Echizen vs Yukimura! or Battles Galore

Note: Many thanks to Huginn et Muninn and the anonymous reviewer 'reviewer' who both (for some reason were rereading the last chapter) and encouraged me not to give up. Also, if you get the carousel/zoo reference, internet cookies for you! (If you were wondering, it was from Catcher in the Rye)

Echizen vs Yukimura! or Battles Galore

Chapter Thirteen: Echizen vs Fuji / Kirihara vs Krauser / Echizen vs Yukimura

"Echizen-san, are you okay?" a kind boy with short black hair asked in concern. She appeared shocked, what with her wide eyes and trembling lip.

"Yeah, yes, of course. But... what did he mean, 'the jerks from his school'?" She looked at them all, her eyes strangely clear, clearer than they'd ever seen.

It occurred to her that she didn't know much about her son's school. He spoke of his vice captain a bit, Sanada, and even more of his captain, Yukimura, but Rinko had never met them. She never heard a word about the rest of the school's inhabitants, and now she was starting to doubt whether he had ever really gone to Rikkai Dai.

"Echizen-san doesn't know..." one of Ryoma's friends muttered. He was usually loud, she thought, the tall one with spiky black hair.

"What don't I know?" she demanded. She had a feeling Ryoma had been hiding something from her, though half the time that feeling was caused by her unwillingness to face him. "How does he know you anyway? You don't even go to his school!" She realized she should have been concerned about Ryoma coming home late every single day. A normal mother would have been worried about him coming home after midnight and leaving before six. A good mother would have thought it strange that her son hung around these boys rather than his own teammates. Her stomach dropped, because for what reason would her son avoid his own team? "Was he having trouble in Rikkaidai?" she asked in a small voice.

Not a single boy would answer her. Her eyes darted to each one of them, searching for answers. But their silence told her enough. Her

poor baby had hidden his problems from her when she was supposed to be supporting him. And apparently had confided in these eight boys.

One boy out of the silent eight finally decided to reply. "We met him at the restaurant. Almost a year ago, right after we lost at the Nationals."

"Restaurant?" Nothing made sense! Oh. Restaurant. Did he work there? The bills had been easier to pay lately, and there was money going into her bank account, more money than she was earning. Why hadn't she cared before? "Oh. Ryoma was working at a restaurant?"

Ryoma... working so hard. She'd seen his grades-straight A's, she thought fondly. He was more than capable of taking care of himself. He was already getting into world renowned tournaments, and he'd be able to retire in his thirties with all the money he would make from tennis tournaments. And if he didn't want to pursue tennis, he had a good head. He could get into any school he wanted and get any job he desired. She didn't need to worry about his future.

Did Nanjiroh's parents think the same way, she wondered. He had never won a major tournament though; he only ever went after the minor ones, nothing like the U.S. Open. Nanjiroh's main goal had been to find a wife, someone through whom he could create the perfect opponent.

Rinko didn't begrudge him that, though. She had loved him with all her heart, even though he didn't seem to return that love. She had loved him passionately, with an undying loyalty to that brave and happy man. But she was quiet. Takeuchi Rinko had always been quiet, so she loved quietly. He had accepted her in the beginning despite her flaws. There were better candidates; bustier, unsullied, more attractive, more talented women who could have snatched him away. But he picked her. It was her mind, she supposed. Nanjiroh had told her the legend of the Muga, some spiritual tennis thing that she never really understood. He assumed any kid of his would

master the first door, he said, but only those with a great mental capacity could open the second door. Which was why someone like Takeuchi Rinko was perfect.

How happy she had been when she gave birth to Ryoma; finally, something that would keep Nanjiroh by her side forever! Nanjiroh had loved the quiet boy, Rinko remembered fondly. She supposed her baby got his introverted nature from herself. She grew to love Ryoma for his own qualities, and not just because he was the son of Nanjiroh. Little Ryoma, selectively observant Ryoma, silent Ryoma, caring Ryoma, struggling Ryoma. Ryoma who had problems at school, Ryoma who sat by her side with needle in one hand and an elephant in the other, little Ryoma who really wasn't so little, who came home with a stiff gait but never complained.

Rinko frowned at her thoughts. No, better walk away from that. Walk away from the bad memories. Avoiding her parents for almost two decades, how horrible it would be to see them again. They had never forgiven her, had they? Well, it was her own fault. Their estrangement was because of her. And Ryoga! She had driven him away too, hadn't she? If she had shown just a little more love, if she had just seen him for his own person and not as her biggest mistake, he would never have left. And now she couldn't face him. And that relationship had died because of her.

And it *killed* her that Nanjiroh's life had been cut short *because of her* .

No, Nanjiroh wasn't dead. He couldn't be. No, they were in the house in California, just her, Ryoma, Ryoga, and Nanjiroh, because he wasn't dead and Ryoga hadn't run away and Ryoma was with her and Nanjiroh was alive-

"Echizen-san." The cold voice broke her from her reverie harder than a rough backhand. It was the boy with blue eyes. He stood there, his eyes locked on hers. Everyone else was gone or leaving through the front door, and only their captain spared the blue-eyed boy a warning

glance before leaving. Oh, time passed her by and she hadn't noticed it.

"Echizen-san," he said again. Rinko blinked at him. Why he wasn't leaving with them?

She blinked again, trying to clear her head of the past. "Yes?" Because dwelling on the past never bode well for her. But dwelling on the past removed her from the present, and sometimes, she had to confess, it was a welcome escape.

"I think you need to realize that Ochibi depends on you. A lot," this brown-haired boy said with a firm, yet quiet voice. It was the calm rolling of the waves before the winds would pick up. "Although it may seem like he can support himself, he is still just a kid in high school, and he still needs you. Which means he needs you to keep a hold on reality."

How blunt, was her first thought. Then, *how rude*, was her second. How dare he tell her what to do? Didn't he understand? Ryoma was already better off not having her around. For God's sake, he was dominating the U.S. Open! He was only ever burdened by her presence, but he still clung to her. "Ryoma needs to let go."

"No!" The boy's fierce refusal caught her off guard. The thunder, the howling of the wind on the sea. "Don't you dare think like that." And his voice wasn't getting any softer. No, this was not water. His eyes were blazing like blue fire, and his mouth set in a firm line. No smiling here. "No child deserves the *neglect* you've shown him. If anything, he needs a parent who actually cares for his well-being." And yet he still had not resorted to shouting.

Rinko was about to protest, to demand what gave *him* the right to say such a thing, to ask what made him think he knew *anything* about her circumstances. But something stopped her. Maybe it was her motherly instinct kicking in, or maybe it was the millisecond she took to consider his words and tone, but for some reason, she saw him speaking from experience.

And it singed her.

Would Ryoma speak like this someday? Would his eyes burn as brightly and as sorrowfully as this boy's? Would he shoulder the hurt that Rinko, his own mother, had caused in him? Oh, but this boy was strong and confident. And Ryoma would be the same; he would survive and be better for it. But why would she ever consider causing him pain to make him stronger?

She choked.

Her own watery eyes sought those smoldering blue, and instead of derision or vitriol, she saw compassion. "What do I do?" she asked, ashamed of the vulnerable pleading in her forlorn voice. She was the water, wasn't she? Weak, unable to make her own form, pushed and pulled by forces she didn't care to change.

The fire in this fantastical boy wasn't quenched. No, the flame was fervent and very much alive. Rinko was warmed to think that she had added kindling and fuel. It was crackling with energy, and she knew that she could do this. The sea was powerful, wasn't it? It occurred to her that it didn't matter how much Nanjiroh had loved her or how much she had loved him. Right now, stepping out of the past, she could finally see that it only mattered that she loved her son. Sons.

She sat down. Rinko had almost forgotten about Ryoga. Her younger boy, Ryoma, would no doubt forgive her. There had been no love lost on his part. But Ryoga?

Well, she would cross or burn that bridge when she got there. For now, just now, she needed to... do... something. Anything. "I should call him. Right now."

The boy's small smile was slowly coming back. But he didn't nod or shake his head. "Echizen-san, I don't think that would be possible."

What now? She had the energy and the drive to set things right, and now this kid, who had effected the change, said she couldn't?

"Long distance calls are expensive. And do you think the hotel would forward your call to the Echizen Ryoma, or that he would accept a call when he has just hung up? You're staying here, Echizen-san, and I know Tezuka hasn't given him any other number to call. So if he calls again, you'll be here to take it."

And that's all she could do. Just be there. "You are a very effective speaker, young man."

This strong young man only smiled back at her with his eyes closed. She knew not to underestimate those closed doors, because blazing behind them was blue fire.

The Nationals would start today. Rather, yesterday. Oh, Ryoma wasn't sure, time zones were so annoying sometimes.

Ryoga was passed out on his bed, not from alcohol like most twenty-something year olds would illegally be, but from sheer exhaustion. Ryoma did have to admit it was impressive, watching his older brother being chased by the NYPD. He was nimble, as Ryoma had expected, but surprisingly acrobatic. Parkour, Ryoga said it was, and proceeded to 'parkour' all the way back to the hotel while Ryoma took the air conditioned route and rode in a cab.

Anyway, his mind was on the Nationals. He hadn't called since the first time because Ryoga was always hanging around, but he knew they had a bye for the first round and a match against either Higa or Rokkaku in the second round. That Urayama kid sent him updates every few days, even though Ryoma hadn't replied once.

"Haven't done this in a while. I'm outta shape," Ryoga whined, though he still hadn't moved from the bed, "Ah, Chibisuke, running around New York city is more fun with friends."

"Where are your friends anyway? Are they tired of you crashing in their hotel rooms too?" Ryoma wasn't really that irritated. It was nice to have a somewhat familiar face around.

"Got none."

Ryoma rolled his eyes. "And what about the guys who ran around New York with you?"

Ryoga weakly waved a dismissive hand. "Ain't no friends of mine."

"Whatever," Ryoma rolled his eyes. Since when did he start expecting Ryoga to make sense?

"Why were you on bad terms with your friends anyway, Chibisuke?"

Ryoga had the distinct ability to ask the questions that hit the hardest. Ryoma pet Karupin a few times and figured a blunt truth was easiest. There was no maneuvering around Ryoga. "I thought they were tricking me. Or using me."

"Yeah? What would make you think such a silly idea?"

Ryoma didn't think it was silly. He had spent such a long time brooding over it, and even that conversation with Kirihara before he left hadn't been enough to assuage his insecurities completely. "It's not silly. My... captain, at my old school, was the one who used me. And subsequently put it into my head that they could be manipulating me too."

"And you listened to him?" Ryoga chortled. "You owe these Seigaku guys for putting up with you. When're you going to call your friends again?" Ryoga asked, resting his head sideways on his folded arms.

"... maybe when you leave."

Ryoga snorted. "You know I'm coming back with you to Japan, right?"

Ryoma snapped his attention to the man. He looked lazy as ever, what with his eyes half-closed and his mouth curved in a slight smile. "What makes you think that?" Ryoma asked emotionlessly. Trust Ryoga to make wild assumptions.

The lazy man flipped over so that his hands were behind his head and he was looking up at the ceiling. "Well, your old man's gone. I'd figured Rinko would be a little more tolerant of me now."

"Doubt it," Ryoma said honestly. He didn't know why Ryoga wanted his mother's approval, but he knew Ryoga probably wouldn't get it. He was one of the reasons his mother was avoiding the states. "I don't know what you did to offend her, but I do know that you'd probably remind her of how Oyaji died."

Ryoga snorted. Again. This time he sat up and looked at Ryoma skeptically. "What makes you think that?" He returned. But he wasn't emotionless. No, he was hurt, Ryoma realized. It took him off guard. Since when did Echizen Ryoga show vulnerability?

"Well," Ryoma figured he was wandering into some uncomfortable territory. He had never actually discussed these things with family, like how Ryoga was related to him. He was sure it would hurt to have it said so candidly. "Since he died, you know, because he got it from *that*, and you were a product of *that*..."

Ryoga blinked at him. "You do know that Nanjiroh's not my blood father, right? We're just half-brothers."

Ryoma didn't expect to fall off the bed. But he had. In surprise. And had almost crushed Karupin. He picked her up and got back to his feet. Palms down on the bed, he leaned forward. "Then how could you be my half-brother? And since when?" It wasn't really a rational question, because it wasn't like you could undo a blood relation. But he had to hear it.

"Since I was born?" Ryoga answered with a chuckle. "Listen kid, I know you think Rinko's perfect and all-"

"What does my Kaa-san have to do with this?" Ryoma knew. He did. He just didn't want to hear it anymore.

"-but virgin births don't happen in this day and age. Wait, you didn't know that Rinko's my mom? God, Chibisuke, you are really clueless! I figured since your old man was dead, she'd be more willing to have her long-lost illegitimate child back. She didn't seem happy when I was around him, so I left." Ryoga hmphed. "Was better off for it anyway," he muttered. Now that definitely looked like a bare-faced lie. Ryoga couldn't hold up his cocky smirk when he obviously wasn't 'better off for it.'

"Though I suppose," Ryoga continued, "Her oldest would still be a reminder of how your dad died, huh?" Rinko's oldest son.

"You need to go back," Ryoma suddenly decided.

"Didn't you hear me, though? She'd hate seeing me."

Ryoma shook his head. "No, she needs to see you. She mentioned you last Christmas. She remembered you." It could work.

Ryoga rolled his eyes, jumped onto Ryoma's bed, and put two heavy hands on each of Ryoma's shoulders. He looked into his younger half-brother's eyes with his own turbulent ones. "That means nothing." Oh, but it meant so much!

Ryoma stood up and welcomed Ryoga's gaze. "You don't know what this means. You were part of her good memories. I just remembered. It was an off-hand comment, but a happy one. She was proud that you were her oldest son. And she only ever remembers people she loves when she's like that. She doesn't think about her parents or her friends. Mostly it's Oyaji, and then me when I'm around, and she *does* mention you. You exist in her ideal world." Ryoma threw a few oversized shirts into his suitcase and clicked it shut.

"You make her sound crazy."

Ryoma stood ramrod straight. "Just help me help her," he pleaded.

Ryoga looked torn. Was it possible he would say no? But the boy looked up, determined. "Okay. How?"

"I'll book a flight for tomorrow morning."

He couldn't lose, not now. After finally beating that Echizen brat-right?-he wasn't about to lose here. He hadn't lost a game since he stepped foot in the Nationals stadium, and now he was losing 4-0? Four lost games in a row?

He could feel Yukimura-buchou's deceptively cool eyes on his back. He could feel all of the regulars, depending on him to win. He had to win. Losing was not permitted.

He knew he was good, he was great! He dove for another ball, but missed it by a centimeter. Dammit! There was blood dripping from his hair, obscuring his vision. There was blood beading from his sweat glands, and he only feared losing.

This was their last chance! First it had been Yagyuu-senpai. What happened? How on earth could that cheater surpass Yagyuu-senpai's laser beam? And Marui-senpai and Jackal-senpai! Two of his closer friends on the team-how did they lose 1-6? Everything was riding on him, and Kirihara wasn't sure he could withstand the pressure. He couldn't afford to lose.

He needed... to go beyond what he'd done before. He was already in Devil Kirihara mode, what else could he do? What did that kid, Echizen, do? Kirihara swatted the tennis ball back, desperate for a point. At least one point. Echizen had tapped into something amazing, something that Yukimura-buchou respected. Something that made Echizen more valuable to Buchou than Kirihara.

He gave a loud battle cry, returning the ball again. He couldn't afford to lose. If he lost-to a foreigner no less!-he would always remember himself as the guy who lost Rikkai its third chance at a National title.

No, no, no no nonono...

Kirihara Akaya would not be that guy! Even collapsed, bloody, on the court, Kirihara would not be the one to lose.

His blonde opponent was much taller than himself. Haughty grayish blue eyes challenged him, looked down *at him* ! How dare that gaijin loom over him with that self-satisfied smirk!

C'mon, he challenged himself. He always rose to the occasion. It was what made him the Devil Kirihara: his persistence, his ruthlessness! He had always faced adversity and come out on top. From his very first day of middle school, the Three Demons had taught him that it would be a hard road, an almost impossible road. But Kirihara Akaya wanted to be the best, and he stayed the course. Or he was just stubborn.

Another lost game. 5-0. Kirihara, as ridiculous as it first seemed, had been blown away into the chain link fence behind him. The pain was blinding, as his skin felt strangely sensitive and his nerves were on fire. He was bloodied after all the scrapes from diving for balls just out of reach and the fear of losing. Because he couldn't lose, even though the stress was getting to him and he couldn't imagine what would happen to him if he lost and he'd be like Echizen, he'd be back where he was in middle school, the lonely pathetic kid.

And this time, he wouldn't have Yukimura-buchou.

The captain would turn his back on him, Kirihara knew it. Because Yukimura-buchou was a winner and winners didn't tolerate losers. Kirihara hadn't shown his talent in the prefecturals or regionals, because Yukimura-buchou had backed *Echizen* . Yagyuu, Marui, and Jackal-senpai were in their third year and would be in college next year. And they had each other and friends in their classes. Kirihara only had the tennis team. Which would undoubtedly abandon him if he lost.

He slid down, his feet touching the ground. But his legs couldn't support him and he fell to his knees. And even then, he couldn't hold himself up, and he had to cushion his fall with his sanguine arms. "Sh-shit!" he cursed. He hadn't stuttered for years.

Defeat the Three Demons of Rikkai. That had been his goal, he reminded himself. Then become number one. What happened to that goal? But shakily, he stood, because he would not lose. No.

15-0

30-0

40-0

"Matchpoint, Nagoya Seitoku!" And Kiri-hara was facedown on the clay, sweating blood. Was it all over? Was Rikkai going to lose because of him?

He could hear that blonde bastard saying something in English. Goddam foreigners, Kiri-hara cursed. Another on the Nagoya team said something in English, and Kiri-hara knew it was an insult.

He clenched his fist, pulling his arm closer to himself. "Ya-Yagyuu-senpai," he struggled, pushing himself off the ground. His skin was still sensitive, but he could push through the pain. "R-Right now, what did those bastards say?"

He could imagine Yagyuu-senpai pushing up his glasses as he translated, "They said, 'Are they really last year's kings? In our country, elementary school kids are better than that seaweed haired bastard.'"

No, they did not . It was an insult, both to Kiri-hara himself and Rikkaidai. And he couldn't tolerate that. He was loyal to Rikkai, he fought for Rikkai! Rikkai was his family-a taciturn family, but a family nonetheless. One that wanted the best for him, because Rikkai was the best.

Was it fear of the consequences of losing that pushed him? Or the need to be the best as he had always strived? Or his loyalty to Rikkai? He wasn't sure. But now, it didn't matter what the reason was. All that mattered was winning. Getting to his feet was painful, yes, but once he stood up, he knew he couldn't lose. "I'll crush you," he growled with conviction. It wasn't just intimidation. It was a vow.

He could've laughed as he saw the first inkling of fear in his foreign opponent. Yes, fear the real might of Devil Kirihara!

He pushed back. He could easily take the games back now. He was faster than ever. He didn't give the blond brat a second to think before he hit the balls back. The blood wasn't getting in the way, it was helping him focus. The pain pushed him further than he thought he could go. He laughed past the pain, he laughed a keening, maniacal laugh because he could and because it incited fear in his opponent, fear of this unhinged Kirihara.

As he set up for a smash, he could see Krauser's terrified eyes close in frightened anticipation. "You bastard, I'm going to dye you red too! HA! Haha!" And he enjoyed the sight of the gaijin falling backwards, Kirihara's tennis ball firmly plowing into his solar plexus. Yes, he had aimed it well. It didn't matter that he didn't make any sense. He aimed for that spot until the foreigner's breaths became labored and it was declared Kirihara's win.

Do you see me, Yukimura-buchou, Sanada-fukubuchou? Aren't you proud? Look what I've done. Now I'm really the devil.

Game set, won by Rikkaidai Fuzoku Kirihara Akaya, 7-5.

Looking down at the crumpled player, Kirihara was still absorbed in his madness. "It seems that," he predicted, "The Rikkai kings won't lose their successive championships." Because they'd continue to the end and beat the Seigaku bastards next. And he continued laughing.

Yukimura smiled to himself. "Now, Sanada. End it," he commanded.

Sanada didn't hesitate. He took one step onto the court. "Shaking. Like the thunder."

The boy had come out of his Devil Mode, or whatever Kiri-hara would title it, and Yanagi had slapped a few bandages on before obliterating Nagoya Seitoku's doubles 1 pair. And then Sanada stepped up, brutally defeating Nagoya Seitoku's last minute replacements. Kiri-hara's eyes were normal now, nowhere near the bloodshot red they had been during the match against Krauser.

It had been simple and quick. Yanagi, Niou, and Sanada didn't think twice in their domination. Sanada didn't even let his opponent score a single point. Yukimura glanced at Kiri-hara, for surely he had put the pieces together by now. Or not. The other team finally knew how they had been played: artfully, like a master violinist with a Stradivarius in hand. It had worked perfectly, Yukimura had to congratulate himself. This was what Rikkai was about. Facing challenges head-on and becoming *better* for it. He had orchestrated the first two losses to push Kiri-hara to the edge. What beautiful music, he thought, basking in the victories of the day. Oh, Kiri-hara had yet to say a word, but Yukimura figured he'd be thankful if he ever figured it out. He would never accuse Kiri-hara of being the brightest player in Rikkaidai. Or anywhere close.

Oh, Yukimura could have chuckled, Kiri-hara still seemed deep in thought. The other regulars dropped hints, and Niou, trickster Niou, had even come out and said it. "*It is our responsibility to disillusion our young ones.*" Trust the Trickster to give it all away. But Kiri-hara still looked troubled about something. Yukimura wasn't about to ask what it was about. He never understood what was going on in the junior's head.

"Yakiniku! Yakiniku!"

Yukimura paused, as did everyone else. They turned, and, ninety degrees to the left, stood the Seigaku regulars. And Echizen?

Yukimura glanced at Sanada and could have smacked him. The stern boy only had his eyes, discomfited and contrite eyes, on Echizen. Who had apparently shot up a foot in the past two weeks. Or he was standing on a low chair. Nope, no chair.

Their vice captain was the first to speak. "Congrats!" So they had heard. "Let's both do our best in the finals." Awkward silence. "Um, actually we're going to eat yakiniku after this-" Really? He never would've guessed. "If you guys want to come..."

Sanada turned his head away and started walking on. Good. Yukimura almost thought he would accept, out of guilt toward Echizen or just to be courteous. There was no room for remorse when the Nationals were within reach. Oh, but Yukimura would play his part because that was part of his persona. "Thank you for inviting us, but we need to practice. Excuse us." He followed Sanada, knowing his team would follow in suit.

With a short glance to the side, however, he could see Kirihara look at the Seigaku team with a puzzled frown. Oh, Yukimura knew it looked bad, what with the boy all bandaged up, but it only showed how dedicated they were to winning. Kirihara eventually turned his perturbed look to the ground and continued walking. The rest of the Rikkai team didn't hesitate in leaving.

Oh, but Yanagi! Yukimura had thought it was clear that Yanagi had to let go of his old ties.

"The data you had during the Kantou Finals. It won't be of any use to you. We have a genius imposter."

"Puri," said Niou.

They couldn't help it, Yukimura understood. Yanagi had to taunt his old friend, using one of their aces, and Niou always went out of his way to confuse his opponents. It wouldn't do Seigaku any good, though. Niou was much more of a genius than Fuji Shusuke could ever be.

A voice... deeper, more mature and almost completely unfamiliar asked, "Tezuka-buchou, that girly-haired jackass will be in singles one, right?"

Yukimura paused in step and gazed back at the boy who was turned to Tezuka. For his sake, Echizen had better be talking about Niou.

"Echizen-kun," the Seigaku captain chided. Yukimura was waiting to hear Tezuka tell him off. "How Yukimura chooses to style his hair is his own business. If he wants a more feminine cut, let him be."

Yukimura whirled around to see their captain not quite smiling, but not frowning either. His entire team had heard Echizen and Tezuka insult him, and he was not going to take this disrespect lying down.

"Excuse me, Echizen-kun?" he said politely. He'd be the better man. He walked up to the boy who really didn't seem like a boy anymore. Actually, up close, he would say the kid had aged a few years too. And shot up a foot. Was this really Echizen Ryoma?

"Yukimura-buchou?" he responded.

Yukimura narrowed his eyes. Now he *knew* this wasn't Echizen. The kid had never called him 'buchou' and hadn't called him by a title at all for... quite a while. For a few months, actually. Since that night at the hospital when he thought about giving up. Echizen had been the only one he told, Yukimura remembered. And it had only earned him the boy's ire and disrespect. The kid never understood what Yukimura had gone through, and the boy never would. Yukimura had thought, mistakenly, that Echizen could become the support Rikkai needed. But he needed to be strong before he could support anyone. Yukimura had only ever had the team in mind!

"Yes, Echizen-kun? Do you have something to say to me?" he asked, wondering what useless words this strange Echizen would have for him. Nothing would change the damage the kid had caused by defecting to this team. Yukimura thought he had prevented this

from ever happening, but he supposed Tezuka and Fuji were wilier than he expected.

"Yes, actually. Yes I do."

Yukimura would have put a hand on his hip, but he had been accused of being girly-looking already once today. He settled on a pointed glare. "Well?"

"Yukimura-buchou!" several voices shrieked and shouted as he fell backward from the blow, mere seconds after the Echizen look-alike had sworn two unmistakable English words that Echizen Ryoma would have never said.

He ghosted light fingers against his jaw. It would definitely bruise. He was tempted to jump up and punch him back, but he wouldn't lose his cool. He stood up and glared at the boy. "Attacking other players is grounds for disqualification, Echizen Ryoma." Oh, he'd get Echizen kicked out of the Nationals for good, and maybe have him tested for steroids. Ha! Wouldn't that be great? He'd never be able to play tennis again!

But this strange Echizen just laughed. A loud, grating, insulting laugh. And some of the Seigaku regulars were stifling their giggles too!

"Then it's a good thing I'm not Echizen Ryoma, huh? And I guess it's a good thing Chibisuke's still in New York. You know, he'll be playing Nadal today. Then Federer. And I have an inkling that he won't be going back to your sorry excuse for a team once he wins."

"Well," Yukimura said, his pride thoroughly trampled, "Then I suppose I could still press criminal charges against you, now can't I?" He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture to tell his team to go ahead without him.

"Ha! If you can catch me!"

No. No way. Yukimura was not going to play his stupid game-and did he just climb the tennis court fence? Where the hell was he going? A short glance to his own team saw Marui and Kirihara trying to choke back their laughter.

"What was that?" he accused Seigaku. Surely they knew what he was and why he was there at all. But they only adopted innocent looks and some of them started whistling.

The snakish one, with the bandana shrugged. "Hell if we know."

Next chapter: Nationals vs US Open

Notes: About bloody Kirihara: I thought it was kind of ridiculous how bloodied up he could get from a mere tennis match, so I gave him a stressed-based condition in which a person 'sweats' blood when under stressful/fearful circumstances, like when facing his own death. To summarize, blood vessels rupture and when the glands produce sweat, it pushes blood to the surface. It makes the skin extremely sensitive to touch.

Nationals vs US Open

Chapter Fourteen: Nationals vs US Open

Echizen had been right. Yukimura did have practice in scheming.

Kirihara wasn't stupid. He may have started out in class 1D back in middle school, but he eventually made it to 1A in high school. Didn't that prove he wasn't stupid? He had built himself up and he worked hard. He was an awesome player, a fear-inducing player. He had sway over his fellow students, and had the love and concern from his upperclassmen. He was intelligent, he told himself.

But when he saw Yukimura-buchou's patronizing smile, it made him feel stupid all over again.

Kirihara wanted to trust his senpai. He wanted to trust Yukimura-buchou and everyone else. But they made it hard to believe in anyone.

Now with his mind clear of all that adrenaline and fear, he could analyze it all. After he had won, after the pain ebbed away into an irritating ache, he was left to tend to himself. He was initially surprised by how bloodied he was, since he only had a few cuts on his face, nothing serious, he thought. Marui-senpai had hesitantly offered to help bandage him up, but all the while, he looked... guilty. Jackal-senpai hadn't said a word. So Kirihara bandaged himself.

What about Yagyuu-senpai? Was he in on it too? When that Krauser guy insulted him in English, Kirihara had asked Yagyuu-senpai to translate, and he knew, *he knew* that Krauser had said nothing about his hair. His English might have been bad, but not that bad.

And then Niou! The one person on the Rikkai regular team Kirihara could never understand, he was the only one who told him anything.

"It is our responsibility to disillusion our young ones." And Kiri-hara was not an idiot. Niou was looking at him.

Kiri-hara's mind jumped to that conversation with Echizen.

Kiri-hara didn't think he could abide by someone if he knew that person was exploiting him. "How can you still-how can you?"

Echizen himself seemed unsure. "I can't believe that everything they did was fake. And it seemed that most of the time, they just wanted me to be happy. Even Yukimura couldn't bring himself to pretend to be so nice, and he obviously has practice in scheming." He looked up into Kiri-hara's conflicted gaze, and Kiri-hara could see that the boy's eyes had lost their haze. There was no doubt, was there?

Did Yukimura have practice in scheming? Kiri-hara didn't want to believe, but his eyes wandered over to his captain anyway. The boy had always seemed strong despite his soft features. He had soft hair, Kiri-hara supposed. It looked soft, silky, nothing like Kiri-hara's own damaged bird's nest. His eyes were rarely angry. They were always... zealous. There was a quality in them that roused others to battle. There was a charisma in the way Yukimura-buchou walked and commanded that no one could refuse him. Except Echizen.

Had Echizen seen something that they had all missed? No, Echizen was an outsider and couldn't know Yukimura-buchou to the depth that they all knew him. Or maybe since they had all evolved with Yukimura-buchou, they couldn't notice any faults. Kiri-hara didn't think Yukimura-buchou had changed since middle school, when the boy was leader who could rally the troops with one radiant smile. People jumped to do his will because he was kind, concerned, and he would guide them all to victory. They were champions.

Before he knew it, Niou and Yanagi's doubles match was over. 6-1.

What? Niou and Yanagi weren't the best doubles team, but they had beaten Nagoya Seitoku so quickly and so easily? Kiri-hara didn't want to think... no, his senpai would never betray him like that. But even

the other team was muttering in English, and from what little he could pick up, their minds were on the same track.

Had Rikkaidai thrown the first two matches?

Nagoya Seitoku probably wouldn't understand. But Kirihara thought he did. Looking for an answer, he directed his bemused eyes over to Yukimura-buchou. But the captain dismissed him easily again with that condescending smile. Did Yukimura-buchou think him stupid? Did he think that Kirihara wouldn't catch on? That he wouldn't come to the awful conclusion that Rikkai had thrown the first two matches so the pressure would force Kirihara to tap into that awful state of mind?

Oh, Kirihara remembered it. A dark place, where all he had was fear and anger and a driving obsession for victory. It was a bad place. It was frightening, losing his mind in such a way.

But that had been Yukimura's goal, hadn't it? What with Echizen gone. Echizen, who stunned them all, who apparently could seize that power only a few privileged tennis players were able to see. *The Muga*. Because great Kirihara wasn't enough. They needed Devil Kirihara, since the Prince had forsaken them.

Yukimura smirked. "Now, Sanada. End it."

"Shaking. Like the thunder."

Kirihara scoffed. Sanada was like a dog, he thought viciously, always at his beck and call. When Yukimura said jump, Sanada jumped. No questions. If Yukimura told him to... jump off the Tokyo Sky Tree, Sanada would give him a yearning stare and then swan dive toward the concrete below. Kirihara wondered, did Yukimura know how much power he had?

Watching the smug look on his face, Kirihara supposed, yes, he did.

And Sanada won 6-0.

Now, walking with his team, Kirihara spotted the Seigaku regulars from afar. Hopefully, they wouldn't want to talk to them. Echizen's words about how *happy* and *trustworthy* they all were made Kirihara's gut twist. Then he had that awful feeling of longing for that kind of blissful camaraderie with his own team.

"Yakiniku! Yakiniku!" two of them were chanting with arms around each others' shoulders. Yakiniku? Sounded goooooood. Kirihara wouldn't mind eating, even if it was with Seigaku. Maybe a yakiniku party was what Rikkai needed.

Kirihara saw the look that Sanada shot to the strange Echizen look-alike who was in the middle of the Seigaku group. This boy was taller, maybe a foot taller. And his eyes were darker. And he was more mature-looking, too. Definitely not Echizen. But Sanada was still directing his stern eyes toward that imposter. From where he was, Kirihara couldn't tell what kind of look he was giving the older boy. Even Yukimura's eyes were on Sanada.

"Congrats!" Seigaku's vice captain said happily. At least he was polite. "Let's both do our best in the finals." Kirihara could have laughed at the awkward silence that followed, but wanted to know how the other boy would get out of it. "Um," he continued, "We're going to eat yakiniku after this. If you guys want to come..." Hell yea they wanted! Yakiniku! What was better than a huge Yakiniku party? He was ready to whoop when Sanada suddenly turned away and left.

"Thank you for inviting us, but we need to practice. Excuse us." Nooooooooooooooooooooo! More practice? And no Yakiniku? How was that fair?

The rest of Rikkai followed like ducklings, but Kirihara couldn't help himself. He stared at that team a little longer, trying to understand these people. This was the team that stole Echizen's devotion. These were the people that Echizen could trust explicitly and with no reservations, the people that Echizen could never bring himself to hate.

"I can't believe that everything they did was fake. And it seemed that most of the time, they just wanted me to be happy."

Happy.

What was it about this team? Was that it? Just that they played around and had yakiniku parties? Marui-senpai had fun, they all had fun, but they never lost sight of the goal. That was it, right? Seigaku just didn't care about winning, they weren't winners like Rikkai. Rikkai was helping them all. Yukimura- *buchou* was leading them to victory. Kirihara was groping at straws. No, needles, and every shiny attractive excuse pricked him harder than the last.

He could feel the same deceptively cool eyes, and forced himself to follow after his captain. To practice, then, he thought with a sigh.

The following confrontation between Yukimura and Echizen's taller doppelganger and the hours after only supported the suspicions he didn't want to accept.

Obviously, Yukimura hadn't cared too much about Echizen because he couldn't even recognize him.

Yukimura was good at controlling rage.

Yukimura was damn proud. And he didn't like being laughed at.

Kirihara had to remember never to laugh at his captain again. Though he had said 'practice,' Yukimura had had changed the meaning to, 'seven-hour torture session directed solely at Marui and Kirihara.' But Yukimura was too cool for that, of course. He used the excuse that Kirihara had almost lost his game against Krauser, which would have consequently lost Rikkai the entire tournament (and didn't bother to mention that *that* was the risk he had gladly taken in manipulating Kirihara to go a little crazy on the court). And also that Marui, Jackal, and Yagyuu-senpai actually lost their respective matches. But only Kirihara and Marui were on the chopping block.

And not one person said a word against it.

Even when Yukimura told them all to go home to rest and directed Kiri-hara and Marui-senpai to find every last tennis ball and clean the courts even though it was past midnight, not a person spoke on their behalf.

At the end, Kiri-hara leaned on his broom and eyed Marui-senpai. "Buchou is getting pissed more often now."

Marui-senpai shrugged and plopped down onto the court. "Meh. Probably because of Echizen leaving. And then that other guy who looked like Echizen. This was all worth it though, to see him completely embarrass Yukimura-buchou!" Marui-senpai snickered to himself.

Kiri-hara supposed they didn't often get to see someone cheekily insult their captain like that. He knew he ought to have been... indignant, at least. Or offended. But, Kiri-hara thought sulkily, Yukimura thought he was stupid. So what if he had let slip a little giggle? It shouldn't have been a big deal, Kiri-hara decided petulantly. It wasn't fair. "Never seen him this vengeful before," Kiri-hara muttered, "And I even won my match." He glanced over to Marui-senpai who was suddenly looking chagrined.

"I... Kiri-hara, you're not mad at us, are you? For losing? Because I'd understand. If you were." he asked in a plaintive voice.

No, who could be mad at that? Kiri-hara looked down at his senpai who was still sitting on the ground with his head slumped. He looked like a chastened five year old, what with the constant movement of his nervous sneakers. "Of course not, Marui-senpai." Did he feel used? Quite. Mad? No. "It's not like you lost on purpose," he said pointedly. Let Marui-senpai admit his fault aloud. Then, he'd see who was genuine.

"Kiri-hara! Don't you get it?" he said with a bitter laugh. Marui-senpai was never bitter. "Yukimura-buchou asked us to lose our matches on

purpose because he thought... well, you know. You always rose to the occasion before." Marui-senpai still wouldn't look up at him and settled on twiddling his fingers. He was always in motion, wasn't he?

Kirihara smiled. Because this meant he had at least one true friend who would always give him the truth. "Why? He knows I would never play less than my full ability."

"Yukimura-buchou's scared of Seigaku," Marui-senpai suddenly said. He patted the ground beside himself for Kirihara to sit. The younger boy crossed his legs and put his elbows on his knees, waiting for Marui-senpai to continue. "Yukimura-buchou thinks that Echizen's got that state of no-self or whatever, and that he'll go play for Seigaku. It's not impossible for them to get him on their team. After all, we've seen that Nagoya Seitoku was able to replace its entire team with foreigners at the last minute. They probably never went to a class either. Maybe they just enrolled this summer."

Marui-senpai sighed, and seemed to chew on nothing at all, as if the act of chewing calmed him. "Seigaku could do that too. They would have Tezuka and Fuji and Echizen. A Trifecta, a Triumvirate," Marui-senpai said the last in English. Or Latin. Kirihara wasn't sure what those words were.

It made a hell of a lot of sense, Kirihara thought. "Yukimura thought I'd get to that state, didn't he?" And why couldn't he? What was so wrong with him that he couldn't get to that state of no-self? "That's why," he choked out, "That's why he let us push Echizen. To make him stronger. And which is why he made you guys push me." Well, on the bright side, at least Yukimura thought he had the potential to get to that state of no-self. On the more realistic side, it meant that Kirihara had disappointed his captain and his team. Despite the pain and the fear and the blood, Kirihara still couldn't best Echizen. The boy wasn't even here, and he was beating Kirihara!

He pounded a fist into the concrete. It wasn't fair! Echizen was off in America, winning against the top players, earning thousands of dollars, and Kirihara was left here with Marui-senpai as his only

friend and confidant. He didn't even have Yukimura-buchou, because *buchou* had been completely taken with Echizen's talent. And Kirihara would forever be seen as a failure. A failure.

"Kirihara," Marui-senpai said calmly, "That's how it's always been at Rikkai, remember? The strongest survive and become stronger because of it. Think of it like... like we're Saiyans. We get stronger after battle and near-death experiences, yeah?"

If only, Kirihara thought. Then he'd fly away, wouldn't he? He'd be stronger than Echizen, quicker, and he'd be able to blast the kid away. Not kill him, maybe send him off to Russia or something. "Thanks, Marui-senpai." The conversation had only made him realize his inadequacies. But Marui-senpai was trying, and it was more than he'd expect from anyone else.

"You did not."

"Why, yes. Yes, I did."

"But you're still alive."

"You sound surprised, little bro."

Ryoma smiled into the receiver. "I guess it's a good thing that you've got running away down to an art."

"Yep. Your ex-captain was a great sport. There's a video of it too, courtesy of a kid from your old school. I told him to send it to you since he's gonna email you anyway. So, how's the U.S. Open going with you?" It was such a... conversational question. Just an excuse to keep the exchange going. Perhaps Ryoga had a point somewhere, but Ryoma couldn't predict it and wasn't too troubled to find it.

Ryoma pressed the button for speakerphone and pulled his sweaty shirt off. "Just fine. Haven't you seen it on the television?" He jumped

onto the bed that Ryoga had slept in; he wasn't going to get his own bed dirty and gross.

"Mhm. You've done better than I would've predicted." Pause. "I went to a Yakiniku party with Seigaku. And a bunch of other schools. Hyotei, some Okinawan school, and another team that knew you. Rokkaku." Ryoma snorted. He intertwined his fingers underneath his head and closed his eyes.

"Rokkaku's nice. Never met Hyotei."

"Oh, there's this one really rich kid. He's an old friend." This was actually nice, Ryoma thought. He was having a regular conversation with his long lost half brother. He never thought he would enjoy small talk with anyone. "Really? How?" Small talk. Had he ever engaged in small talk?

"He gave me a ride once."

Ryoma didn't know how to keep the conversation alive, and felt no pressing need to do so. There was a comfortable silence on the speakerphone, and Ryoma didn't want to break it. Ryoga must have been comfortable too, because he didn't bother saying another word until a few minutes later.

"You know, Chibisuke, I played in a Grand Slam before."

Now that was news. "Which one?" Probably the U.S. Open. Ryoga wouldn't have had any funds to do the tournaments in Europe or Australia-

"French Open." Well, he stood corrected. Ryoga lectured, "Didn't you ever ask, 'Why does my incredibly handsome and talented brother keep asking why I'm playing here?' Chibisuke, didn't it ever occur to you that it was a weird question?"

"Well, yeah," Ryoma admitted. But he had always been more concerned with his own answer than why his brother was asking. He

understood that eccentricity was part of the package when he accepted Ryoga as his brother.

It sounded like Ryoga had just taken a deep breath. "I lost in the first round." When would the surprises end? For some reason, Ryoma had never imagined his brother losing to anyone apart from Oyaji. "To Nadal, of all things. It was his first Grand Slam tournament too," Ryoga chuckled. The sound of his restrained laughter sounded hollow on speakerphone. "Lost my sponsor. Man, was he pissed... anyway, I wanted to say that I think I could've won. If I had opened the third door."

Third door. Had it something to do with that magical tennis skill that he heard Yukimura muttering about once? The Muga. But it was all superstition, wasn't it? Who ever heard of such ridiculousness?

"He might not have said anything to you, since he probably wanted you to find it on your own. But I overheard him when he talking about it with Mom-"

"Mom?" Ryoma interrupted with a smile. So it worked. He wondered why they weren't talking about *that* . That was much more important than any tennis voodoo. "You never told me how it worked out with Kaa-san."

Silence.

"Yeah, we had a long heart-rending talk. So anyway, years ago, your Oyaji-"

"But you still call your adoptive father my Oyaji instead of just 'Oyaji.' Or even 'Tou-san.' Do you still have some unresolved issues?"

He heard a heavy sigh from the other side, and swore he could hear Ryoga rolling his eyes. "So *Oyaji* was telling her about it. This whole, no-self thing, and having the mental acuity to actually predict the way a match would go-which I've almost mastered by the way-and using your experiences to define your tennis."

Ryoma was hardly going to let the matter of *their* mother go, but what Ryoga was talking about... that sounded familiar. Ryoma remembered his most challenging matches. Something like that had happened, hadn't it? Back in those games, against Kirihara, against Fuji, it felt that Echizen Ryoma didn't exist. Only his experience of other players guided his tennis.

"But you can't lose yourself completely," Ryoga contradicted himself. He seemed to pause, and Ryoma figured he was just thinking deeply.

Ryoma didn't know where Ryoga was going with this. "But that's what it is. Surrendering to experience." Wasn't it? That's what he had been doing, albeit unwittingly.

"That's not even one of the three doors. It's like the precursors to the doors. It's what I've been seeing in the games you've played, both live when I was there, and even on the t.v. You haven't even opened the first door?"

Ryoma wasn't sure what all this 'door' business was about, but there was something important about it. They seemed like levels of supernatural tennis ability. But that was ridiculous! "Well, what do you suggest I do to reach the first door?" Ryoma humored him.

"You don't."

"Excuse me?"

"You don't need the first or second door. Helpful, sure, but not what you need. First door concentrates all of that energy, tennis experiences, the Muga to whichever body part needs it, your arm, leg, whatever. The second concerns training your mind to think critically. Some people can predict how many moves a match will take. But those two just make it easier and harder to reach the third."

"I'm going to hang up unless you're going to start making sense." Ryoma realized why he didn't like talking on the phone. He couldn't

see Ryoga's face or hear the inflection in his voice as clearly. He was missing some crucial information in this conversation, and wish that Ryoga had told him all this confusing stuff before he left for Japan. He growled in frustration.

"Don't hang up!" But talking on the phone had the added benefit of allowing Ryoma to hang up if he found a conversation not worth having. "Just listen," Ryoga said, "Federer's going to be hard to beat. And when you play him, you can't be playing for money."

Is this where their conversation was culminating? He wasn't going to ask about 'fun' again, was he? Money was important. It's what professionals did, right? They played to make millions. Even Federer had more than fifty-five million in prize money over the years. "But..."

"I played for money, and it got me nowhere. You need to play for for yourself. The third door requires you to find yourself and to ditch all of the rational thought." Which was... the exact opposite of the first two doors?

Ryoga sounded confident now. "And well, from what I've seen both from how you've played at the open and the ideology of your old team, you won't be able to open the third door by yourself. So I'm telling you."

Ryoma felt that his brother was about to impart some crucial knowledge, some secret about the world that all the rest of mortals spent their lives trying to figure out. Unintentionally, he felt himself holding his breath and staring at the phone. He picked up the receiver for no specific reason at all and held it to his ear.

"What?" Well, here it was. The world-shattering truth that his long lost brother had eavesdropped from their dead father one night years ago. A great truth.

"Have fun."

That was it? What a joke! Ryoma laughed a little and figured if Ryoga wasn't gonna tell him, then he wasn't gonna tell him. There was no forcing a great truth from the playful guy. He disappointedly put the receiver back down, ending the call. What bull.

It was corny, it was common. Fun? It was the excuse people used when they lost. Sports were supposed to be for fun, adults would say to kids. But fun didn't pay for his apartment or his mother's medicine.

He'd keep it in mind, though. Fun.

Sure, fun was great and all, Ryoma thought as he angrily scratched his head, but even Rikkaidai had proven that dedication and hard work earned the trophy, Ryoma thought angrily. Twice in a row, they were National Champions! What good did it do for Seigaku? If tennis teams were made up of people like Kikumaru-senpai, Momo-senpai, and Marui-senpai, they'd get nowhere! Sure fun was great for making life worth living, but it did nothing for winning. He had played best when he wasn't having fun, right? He remembered his match against Fuji. When he'd had fun, he had been losing. He only beat the genius when he finally got serious. It wasn't fun at all. He had only had fun against Tezuka-buchou, and still he had lost.

What did anything mean? It couldn't mean that losing was fun, because Ryoma knew from constant experience with Oyaji that losing was not fun. There must have been something deeper, inexplicable. Something that Oyaji had and had always tried to teach him. It must be something more, but Ryoma couldn't find it.

The day before the U.S. Open Finals, Ryoma found himself at a public park a few miles away from his hotel. He didn't want to run into anyone else who had played in the Open, and figured they'd all be practicing and such in the courts closer to the stadium.

But he wasn't playing. No, he was sitting crossed-legged on the grass, watching some kids play around. He had his tennis racket

with him, but had forgotten the tennis balls. His head was in such a jumble that he didn't know much of anything anymore.

Maybe he needed to talk to someone. He ran a troubled hand through his hair and barely restrained a sigh. He shouldn't need to sigh. What did it matter that all his friends were in Japan? That the only people he knew in this country were his opponents and the man who brought him here but had never visited him again? Ryoma almost wished that the Seigaku team was here with him. He knew Oishi-senpai would be the first to try to make him feel better, and Tezuka-buchou would offer some awkward warning against feeling complacent.

"Maybe I just need a Ponta," he muttered to himself. Back in Japan, since he was short on money, soda was a luxury. But now... he'd earned eight hundred thousand American dollars just by making it to the finals. And if he won... he'd be a millionaire. Of course he could spare the dollar and fifty cents it took to buy a can of Fanta, despite it being overpriced. They didn't sell Ponta here; he suspected it was just a Japanese version of Fanta anyway.

His drink was refreshing, sure, but he still wasn't sure what he needed to do. He took his place on the grass again, a little hill that eventually dipped into a flat valley that served as the fenced tennis court. He lied down on the grass with his elbows supporting his upper body so he could take an occasional drink. Maybe he should think simply. In simple sentences.

He wanted to play Federer. But he wanted to play in the Nationals. But if he dropped out, the U.S. Tennis Association might not pay him. Since there wasn't an emergency. But he needed the money. And he did want to play Federer. But he wanted to at least *watch* the finals of Nationals. Which was the day before his match against Federer. And what of this 'fun' that Ryoma just couldn't understand?

"Yo, wanna play?"

Ryoma lifted the bill of his cap to look up. The words and tone reminded him of Momo-chan-senpai, but the voice was all wrong. The sun blinded him for a brief moment, but the brightness might have also been caused by the kid's blond hair.

"Not really," Ryoma muttered and pulled the cap back down to keep out the sun.

"You have a tennis racket," the other kid observed aloud, gazing at the red racket sitting beside him. He looked about Ryoma's age and height.

"So I do," Ryoma answered, pretending to be surprised, much like Kawamura whenever he didn't have a racket directly in hand, Ryoma reckoned with a small reminiscent smile. "Whyever would that be here?" He continued. Sarcasm felt comfortable, familiar. The only familiar thing in this country that used to be his.

The kid took a seat on the grass beside him. "I've played you before, Ryoma Echizen," he said. Such a long time since someone had said his name like that to him. Given name, then family name. How weird it was now.

Ryoma glanced over at the blonde, noting his brilliant blue eyes. Like Fuji. Fuji-senpai. "Really? I don't remember," Ryoma confessed, not feeling guilty in the least. He had played plenty of people when he had lived in the states. That's what happens when you're a junior league champion. But even so, he thought suspiciously, he'd remember such a presumptuous guy, so like Kikumar-senpai. No, Kikumar-senpai wasn't often aware of his social gaffe, and this guy probably knew he was being rude. More like Kaidoh-senpai, really. Ryoma shook his head and tried to remember this uninvited person; he thought he'd remember a boy with such an annoying voice.

The other boy didn't seem to be getting angry though. "My father knew your father," he said, like it would get Ryoma talking to him more.

But Ryoma could only smile sardonically and held back a sarcastic laugh. "Why should I care?" He didn't feel like caring about anything right now. He had too much to worry about to bother with caring. Should he play against Federer? Could he win against Federer? How was his Mother doing? It sounded like it was going well, but Ryoma was a good liar...

"Well I thought they should meet. I figure your dad would be a good example of what good coaching is-"

"My dad died a year ago." It had been more than a year. And had they celebrated it? Ryoma tried to remember what they did that day, but some months had been so obscured by misery that he must have blocked them out. What was that date, even?

The look on his face was similar to Inui's when he wasn't sure what the social convention was in a certain situation. "... oh. I'm sorry...?" the other kid said, as if he wasn't sure what he was supposed to say. Not one person had said that. Ever. The funeral had been small and limited and Ryoma hadn't let anyone approach him. And the first to say those cliché words of sympathy was a complete stranger.

This time, Ryoma really did laugh. "It's not your fault." He stood up and stretched. There was something thrilling about randomly meeting a stranger. "How about that game?" Ryoma shrugged, figuring he had nothing else to do at the moment.

But what a game it was! There was no pressure to win. No one was watching him, no one judging. His opponent was an unranked stranger, a challenging player, who he had apparently competed against once upon a time. How nice it was to play a game that didn't matter at all.

He served his famous twist serve with no thought to whom he might be saving or what dollars he'd earn. He served it with all the energy of a child. It was like he was rediscovering tennis.

How invigorating, Ryoma thought with a smile, to play against another kid his own age. Was this what Ryoga expected him to do? No, Ryoga expected him to use this feeling to win against Federer. This feeling of freedom, of playing with no obligations or responsibility. There was nothing to prove, nothing on the line, no money, no championship, it was just... bliss.

And against a stranger!

He thought he could only experience such fun playing tennis against his friends like Fuji-senpai or Tezuka-buchou, but no! He could have this brilliant euphoria anytime! Against anyone! *Even* Federer.

A ball zoomed past him, but Ryoma just smiled. How exciting this was! And he wasn't even losing, he joked to himself. Who said having fun meant he had to suck? Oh, he thought with a laugh, that was me! How silly.

He didn't lose himself in his tennis. This was nothing like the so-called Muga . There was no universe-shifting spiritual experience, no kind of supernatural energy, and no phenomenal foresight. There was only... this. And, Ryoma thought as he approached matchpoint, he had kinda found himself.

"Thanks for the game," Ryoma said, for once not saying the words by rote. He was sincerely thankful.

"No, thank *you* . That was much better than any game I'd ever played. Man, I can't believe I never met you in the junior leagues..."

Ryoma thought so. "So I didn't play you in any tournaments."

"Uh... no, not really."

"Street courts?" Ryoma asked. He didn't think the boy was lying about them playing each other, though it was possible.

"No... it's, well you wouldn't remember cause we were kids, but my dad kind of hated your dad, and they arranged a match. I lost, and anyway, I've been training ever since to beat you." The kid pouted. "But look where that got me!"

Ryoma didn't care much for this stranger's sob story. "Mada mada dane..." he muttered.

"scuse me?"

"I said you've still got a long way to go. First of all, don't make beating me your goal." With a newfound appreciation for the game, Ryoma speculated, "You're probably better off playing to have fun than to beat a certain person." Maybe that was why his games against Oyaji had always been so bitter. His only ambition was to trounce the older man, and with such a shallow goal, how could he have won? Especially against a guy like Echizen Nanjiroh who only ever played to a more, dare he think it, *profound* end.

"So I guess you'll be having fun against Federer tomorrow?" he asked scornfully.

Ryoma had always been pragmatic. Winning against Federer and guaranteeing his million would be pragmatic. He needed to be, since no one else was. Nanjiroh was the perfect epitome of idealism, and his mother had never been around much. And then after he died... well, she still wasn't around much in the full sense of the phrase.

For once, he wondered, could he ditch the pragmatism? Was it stupid to just leave?

Did it matter that he couldn't find some supernatural tennis ability? No! Not at all! All that mattered was that Ryoma knew where he belonged, and on the court against Federer wasn't it. It would be the first time that a finalist dropped out of the tournament. Well, he was also the youngest person to make it to the finals. Ryoma figured the tennis world should prepare itself now. He was determined to be a lot of 'firsts'.

"No, I think not," Ryoma smiled. He gathered his things and gave a small wave as he walked away. If this blond-haired kid really liked tennis, Ryoma was sure they'd meet again.

A great surprise greeted him at his hotel door. Was he dreaming? "Kaa-san? What are you doing here?" In America? When she had so ardently fought to avoid the country? Her hair was up in a ponytail and she wore a light summery blouse and slacks, resembling the district attorney she would have been. A smile graced her soft features, and only made Ryoma think that he was hallucinating. Or something.

"I heard Ryoga talking to you over the phone, then I got this email, and I decided I..." *finally* "... needed to support you." Which meant she needed to come to New York? A simple phone call wouldn't suffice?

Ryoma was shocked. "Oh." And crestfallen. He'd just made the decision to go back to Japan after all. How could he return when his mother flew all the way here to see him play against Federer? "Oh," he said again, not sure how he was going to go about all of this. He had already dropped out... his formal resignation hadn't been completely sent through the validating process, but he still didn't want to take it back. "Well, you see, Kaa-san," for some inexplicable reason, Ryoma was nervous, "About the Open..."

He knew how it sounded: weak, uncertain, hedging... but his mother's face lit up anyway. It was a bright smile, a radiant happiness that Ryoma felt he hadn't seen in years.

"You are so much like Nanjiroh," she sighed happily.

Ryoma tried to hide his cringe but failed. He hated hearing how much he looked, sounded, acted like Nanjiroh. No doubt, she'd start talking about how she was expecting him to be home any minute now and how, of course he isn't dead.

But Kaa-san surprised him. "Nanjiroh... loved you more than a Grand Slam title. The morning of his last official match, he was about to be ranked number one. But you brought out his tennis racket and just looked at him." Her voice wavered, as if she was holding back tears, but her eyes looked dry. In a comically deep voice, she impersonated Nanjiroh, "'Oi Rinko, don't you think this kid's got a pair of nice eyes?'" Her smile shook, but she was obviously still happy. "That's what he said, and he decided he'd retire right then."

This was the first time Ryoma was hearing of this. "Why... why are you telling me this?" At all? Right now? Why was she telling him that Ryoma had stopped his father from becoming number one in the world? From achieving such a great goal?

She sniffled, and Ryoma closed the distance between them. He wrapped a filial arm around her and looked at her. "He didn't want you thinking that he gave up on his dreams because of you." Guiltily, Ryoma had to admit that it was his first thought. "Because *you* were his dream." Ryoma had a feeling that he had known this, at least subconsciously, for a while. Oyaji had never seemed overly concerned about making money or being number one. He only wanted to play tennis against his sons.

He heard a knock from the inside of his hotel room. Kaa-san stifled a bright laugh, "And you, Ryoga, you became part of his dream too." Was Ryoga inside his hotel room? "Nanjiroh only ever wanted to... to play tennis and have fun. And that's why, Ryoma, you're quite like him. In a good way," she lightly joked.

"You sure about this, Chibisuke?" Ryoga's head popped out of the hotel room. Ryoma probably should have gotten his extra room key back.

"How'd you even know?" Ryoma asked, exasperated. How'd they know about his dropping out of the U.S. Open? He thought he'd be the one breaking this kind of news to his family.

Ryoga fully exited the room and stood by their mother. "Mom got an email about you quitting the Open. Anyway, you sure about this decision? It's a pretty big one." His older brother fixed him with an evaluating stare.

Had he thought of all the ramifications through? Had Ryoma analyzed every single consequence of such a drastic withdrawal? Not really, but Ryoma couldn't bring himself to care anymore. The Open could wait. The Nationals, with all his friends, couldn't. "I don't think I'm ready to win a Grand Slam," he admitted. "I don't want the attention or anything, and I want to be able to play tennis for the rest of my high school career. I kind of don't even want it as a job," Ryoma realized. How incredibly sudden was that, he surmised. He only ever became aware of what he knew when he voiced his thoughts aloud. He nodded. "Yeah, I've made my decision."

"Sweet. Three seats back to Japan!" Ryoga declared. "Damn, Chibisuke, there's so much else we need to do to make this happen!"

Ryoma was about to tell him that it would be nearly impossible to make it back to the Nationals in a reasonable time, especially since the flight took more than twelve hours. Not to mention jetlag and a myriad of other concerns that he couldn't possibly vocalize in that moment. It was weird, Ryoma thought, that his mother was sitting on his bed smiling, even bouncing a little. She was really okay, wasn't she? Ryoma was sorely tempted to interrogate Ryoga about their mother because everything was too happy. Ryoga was even tossing things into the same suitcase Ryoma had hastily packed just a few days ago, all the while chatting their ears off about some rich kid he had reunited with. Kaa-san was nodding, her small smile there as if it had never left. And Ryoma was sitting on his bed with his legs crossed, wondering why this scene was so perfect. Like a dream, so unreal. Ryoma had long given up hope for something so happy. He wondered if he was imagining it all, but stopped his mind as soon as he realized what he was thinking. Once you started questioning

things in a dream, it fell apart. And Ryoma really, *really* liked this, dream or not.

Next chapter: The Prince vs the Child of God

Notes: There's a one-shot that'll make this chapter and the next chapter more credible (Bird's Eye View storyid=6053786). It just didn't fit in this story since it centered completely on Ryoga... Thanks for reading, guys!

The Prince vs The Child of God

Warnings: Spoilers for the entire series and mature-ish language

Notes: One more short cameo from an oft-requested character. Also, there's a shift in perspective from Ryoma to Kirihara that might be hard to notice. Just know that it's out there. Not sure if I like this chapter as much as my others, but I certainly worked on it a lot, so I hope you like.

Eyes of Rikkai

by The Honorable Arik Novak

Chapter Fifteen: The Prince vs. The Child of God

It was beautiful. And big.

"Don't tell me, you have a helicopter and a rocket ship too, huh?" Ryoma asked on the cell phone, a little stupefied that he'd be riding in a jet fighter aircraft and a little jealous that a teenager could have access to such a thing. It was a shiny black and had two turbojets on each side. Sleek.

"Of course," Ryoma could just imagine this arrogant teenager saying with an aristocratic wave of a hand, "But the helicopter would take, at the very least, twenty-seven hours, and the ship only launches up. No matter your talent, you still haven't the training for space travel. "

Ryoma wasn't sure if there was a compliment in there somewhere, but was sure that there was a jab at him for not having trained for space. Well, he supposed he shouldn't be too insulted by that. "So how long will this take?"

"It's three thousand kilometers per hour at the very least, and if there are approximately, *and I'm rounding up so not to disappoint you*, ten

thousand kilometers between here and New York, then you're looking at almost a 4-hour flight."

What? His flight from Japan to New York had been twelve, nearly thirteen, hours with an additional stop over in some random city! He would be home in plenty of time. He snorted to himself. He could probably even make it back to the U.S. Open, he jokingly told Ryoga.

"Sure, but you'd miss whatever celebration parties your team will have," Ryoga nudged him.

Turns out, it had taken exactly two hours, fifty-eight minutes, and twenty-eight point four seconds from take-off to landing in Narita. He had asked the pilot to time it exactly. The limo ride, courtesy of the mysterious Atobe, could take longer than his flight to Japan. They landed at the Narita airport but had to wait for the stairs to align with the door; Ryoma had forgotten that it was a private jet.

They disembarked, with Ryoga taking two steps at a time. "Yo, Chibisuke, your creepy friend was hanging around coach's house-"

"Wait. You didn't move back into the apartment?" he asked his mother. She was giving the address to the driver as they walked from the jet to the car parked nearby.

She shook her head. "Sumire didn't feel it necessary. Once we get back on our feet, I'll look for a place closer to your school. Rikkai really was quite far away from our apartment."

Did she know he had practically resigned from Rikkai? That he had cut all his ties with that school, though he hadn't filed an official withdrawal? He supposed he should have done that first, since it would be almost impossible to enroll in Seigaku. "Um... you know that I'm planning to transfer to Seigaku soon, right?"

His mother nodded hesitantly. "I heard from your friends, but I figured I'd only believe it once you told me. And since that's done with, I suppose Ryoga and I will start the search for a place closer to

Seigaku." She smiled at him, not once questioning his decision. Ryoma wondered at the transformation he'd seen in her. She was happy. Ryoga had done what Ryoma hadn't been able to do for months.

"Chibisuke, are you planning on playing for Seigaku?" Ryoga asked him, opening the limo's door. They all climbed in, but Ryoma didn't have enough peace of mind to simply admire the leather interior or the bar or the television. The ride was smooth too, but he had a lot troubling his mind.

"I don't know. Depends on if I can get transferred to Seigaku in a day. Which is impossible." He had more time than he initially planned since his predicted fourteen hour flight became a mere two hours, but even so, Rikkaidai wouldn't let him leave in time to play for Seigaku in the Nationals. He couldn't possibly play for Seigaku's team if he couldn't get enrolled in the school. And it was summer, and school administration didn't work much during vacation... though Seigaku might approve the transfer quicker than usual for a tennis star like Ryoma. Despite all that, would he have enough time in one day? Even so, the departure would have to be approved by Rikkai Daigaku Fuzoku, which wasn't going to happen anytime soon. And that was the step he was the most stuck at.

"Well, with that attitude, of course it's impossible," a smooth voice admonished from the darker depths of the limousine.

The voice caught him off guard because he hadn't realized just how long the limo was. "Excuse me? Who are you?"

Whoever it was slid down the seat toward them since there wasn't really space for standing. He looked familiar, Ryoma thought.

"Atobe Keigo. You know, this *is* my limousine. And I *said* that you're not going to get anywhere with that disposition," he sneered. Oh, so this was the rich guy he'd spoken to on the phone. And, he thought as he analyzed the way the boy moved, this was the guy who had challenged Sanada...

Ryoma leaned back into his seat and folded his arms as if he owned the place. "So what do you suggest, Monkey King?"

The boy's eyebrow twitched in irritation. "All you have to do is get Yukimura to work for your plans. Get him to write a scathing enough complaint, and you'll be kicked out of Rikkai in no time, summer or not. And I'm sure Seigaku's a pathetic enough school that it'll do anything to have you, despite your criminal record."

Ryoma had recognized the other boy's need to sound superior so didn't hold it against him. But would that work? Yukimura wouldn't do anything to help Ryoma join Seigaku; he'd have to be devious, just like Yukimura himself. He glanced at his brother and mother, both of whom were looking to Ryoma to make a decision.

"I'll think about it."

Ryoma recognized that fiery blue look. He'd only seen it in small doses, like when someone made a joke about the tensai's little brother, or when someone stole the last wasabi roll right from under his nose. And that look, that fearsome relentless glower was aimed directly at the intruder.

He seemed to wilt under that stare; who wouldn't? But he held his ground and cleared his voice. "Echizen, I need to talk to you. Alone."

"Anything you say can be said in front of Fuji-senpai," Ryoma said, noticing that Kiri-hara seemed to choke at the word 'senpai.' He smirked. "Because knowing you," Ryoma turned to the smiling genius, "Fuji- *senpai*, you'll listen in on the conversation even if I asked you to leave."

Fuji-senpai was still glowering at Kiri-hara, even with a smile on his face. It made him look even more menacing than usual. "You know me so well, Ryoma," Fuji-senpai said without any honorific at all, probably just to get on Kiri-hara's nerves. Ryoma had to stifle his laughter at seeing Kiri-hara's blush; he couldn't think they were *that*

close, could he? Fuji continued, "Though if I leave, your guest might be more comfortable. Would you rather I leave, Kirihara?" Now the omission of an honorific this time was outright rude. But Ryoma didn't mind at all because seeing the offended frown on the other boy's face was more than worth it.

"Actually, yes, I would rather you leave," Kirihara said with disdain. Fuji left them with his Cheshire smile and closed the door behind him. Ryoma knew he would be lurking close.

He sat down on the bed, not offering a seat for the other boy. He wouldn't even pretend to be hospitable. "How are you here?" Ryoma asked first.

Kirihara scoffed. "You have a little stalker in that Urayama kid, and he's... an extrovert."

"No, not how you found me. How-what drove you to visit me at all?"

Kirihara looked uncomfortable. "Well, you know, the finals were postponed for three days, and I kinda. I don't know." Well, Ryoma had no idea the Nationals had been pushed back. This could only be good, though. He would have more time to put his plan to action. He noticed that Kirihara was eyeing the rolling chair tucked into the desk, and it was obvious to Ryoma that he at least wanted to sit. But Ryoma didn't want to offer him even that. Finally, Kirihara scoffed and dragged the chair toward himself, sitting so that his crossed arms were on the back and his legs on either side. "You're back. From America."

"Yes. I noticed." Ryoma would do nothing to ease Kirihara's discomfort. A little sarcasm always unsettled his enemies.

"And you haven't beaten Federer."

Was it in Kirihara's habit to state the obvious? Ryoma didn't remember the other boy being so simple-minded. "I dropped out. It's

been on the news. Or," Ryoma said guardedly, "is this about the letter I left with Jackal?"

Kirihara's nod was stiff and slow, feeling like a whole lot of effort for the small movement. "So are you playing for Rikkaidai or Seigaku?" Kirihara finally asked, getting straight to the point. He had little doubt as to where the kid would play. The kid had never understood Rikkai.

Echizen smirked. "You didn't find my letter funny? Even the little part for you?" he snickered.

Note? To him? When did Kirihara ever get a little part written for him? "Did you write something for me specifically?" he asked cautiously. He almost didn't want to know what it said.

Echizen chuckled. Kirihara didn't think he liked the sound of it. "I just added that you could look at it since you wouldn't be able to read it anyway, what with your deplorable English skills." When Yagyuu had translated, he'd said nothing like that at all! Oh, Kirihara thought he had seen his name, but the paper had been snatched away too quickly for him to even try to translate it into Japanese and he'd run after Echizen as soon as he had heard those bitter words. Kirihara thought he could feel the blood rushing to his cheeks. So what if his English wasn't so great?

"What, are you begging me to return to Rikkaidai?" Echizen continued.

Yes, that was the gist of it, wasn't it? "Well, I wouldn't say *begging*," Kirihara basically lied. It was begging. He would beg. But he hoped he wouldn't have to resort to a more conspicuous form.

"Then what would you call it?" Echizen asked, folding his arms.

Ooh, that was not good, Kirihara thought. He avoided the question to save his pride. Instead, he attempted to appeal directly. "Tell me why you wouldn't go back."

Echizen actually laughed out loud and leaned back on the bed. He chanced a smug glance over to Kirihara. "Tell me why I shouldn't go to Seigaku," Echizen countered skilfully.

The ball was in Kirihara's court now. He outlined his reasons logically, just like Yanagi would have.

"They're loud." *They're out-going.*

"They don't take tennis seriously." *They're fun.*

"They're not really a team, are they?" *They're a family.*

"And it's not like they'll win." *Unless they have you.*

Kirihara felt even more uncomfortable. He had just wasted his shot. What sane person would leave any of that? By the look on his face, Kirihara bet that Echizen read between the lines and knew all the good points that Kirihara wasn't ever going to articulate aloud. Frustrated, Kirihara sighed. "Well, Echizen, I answered. Now you answer me." It felt pointless, though. Echizen would always choose Seigaku.

"Whoever said this was going to be an equal exchange?" Echizen frowned.

"Hey, it's only fair!" Kirihara protested.

"Fair? Since when does Kirihara Akaya care about being fair?" he sneered. It was alien to him, Echizen with such an ugly look on his face. The kid was livid. This was no tennis game anymore. No, this was battle, and Echizen was winning.

"I have always cared about-"

"Really?" Echizen jumped off of the bed. "What about at the indoor tennis courts, hm? Or when *you* had our *entire class* gang up against me? Tell me how that is fair!"

This was the emotion he had wanted from Echizen that day at the airport. Anger, frustration, signs of the weak-minded... but the boy wasn't weak. No, this new Echizen was strong. Then Kirihara just had to be stronger. "Of course it was fair," he said with a calm cold. "You were always being your haughty, arrogant self, thinking you were better and smarter than everyone. Tennis at Rikkai was all I had, and *you* were taking it away!" Kirihara felt his eyes sting, and only felt angrier.

"And you never even realized how much it was worth, what with your whining about not getting a stupid jacket, and you broke the windows of the tennis club. You couldn't even wait till morning like a normal kid, no, Echizen Ryoma was *special*, and Yukimura was *convinced* you were special, and then the indoor courts! Sanada slapped me!"

Kirihara didn't care that now his voice was sounding hysterical. He had a long list of grievances against Echizen and dammit, he was going to get through it! He was on his feet, towering over Echizen. "I pulled your head back, big deal. You nailed me in the crotch! And then I never laid a hand on you, but I got Sanada's slap? And it was pretty obvious to me that you didn't care about being in the regulars. Don't you *understand*?" Was his tirade near over? He could feel himself losing steam.

He was the only one fighting, and he was losing. "That was a position I would have killed to get," he said, exhausted, "and obviously it didn't mean a thing to you! And then Yukimura got sick, and you never once visited him with us after we dropped him off. It was like you thought you were so much better than us, you snob! "

Kirihara took a long shuddering breath, but could only glare at the boy who was making his life miserable. He wasn't done yet. "And then I saw you with *them* . You had known them for a while. Probably since before the indoor courts. And just, I-why the hell did you ever come to Rikkaidai in the first place?" he asked in a cracked voice. It went unspoken, but understood, that everything would have been fine if Echizen had gone to Seigaku. Kirihara didn't care that Echizen

might have helped Rikkaidai on the way to the top; he wished Echizen had never set foot on the Rikkai campus.

There was a moment of silence, and Kirihara swore he'd go crazy if the other boy didn't say something.

"I was looking for the best," Echizen simply said.

Wired, Kirihara pushed. "Rikkaidai is still the best," he said decidedly. He wouldn't let Echizen argue that anyone was better, because no one was. Especially not Seigaku.

Echizen shrugged and sat back down on the comforter. "I'm no longer looking for the best."

How could Kirihara argue with that? The most he could do would be to call Echizen stupid for not wanting the best, and that would hardly endear him to Rikkaidai. It chilled him that Echizen neither wanted nor needed the best. The best needed him.

"And I don't belong in Rikkai. I think I mentioned this in my letter."

Kirihara threw up his arms. "Yeah, yeah, we all know you're a cold sarcastic jerk. That's not new. You *could* belong in Rikkai, if only you'd... try." Kirihara could hear himself, his beseeching voice, and cursed himself for finally begging. It wasn't in his words, but his tone.

Echizen shook his head. "You made that impossible by being a bully." A bully? "Yes, you bastard, a bully!" his voice was raised and he was standing up, eye to eye. But quickly, he gained control of himself, so quickly that Kirihara doubted he had lost control at all. "And we have two completely different world views," Echizen continued, "I should have left earlier anyway."

This was the biggest kind of emotional explosion he could expect from Echizen, and it was still disappointing. Kirihara wanted Hiroshima, but instead he got a nameless angry boil that quickly lowered to a simmer.

"Cookies?"

Both Kirihara and Echizen whipped their heads around to the open door. It wasn't the frilly blue apron with purple hearts that had them staring. Nor was it the fact that Fuji seemed entirely unconcerned about the shouting match. More, it was the fact that he was simply there at all.

"Did Ryuzaki-san make them?" Echizen asked distrustfully.

Well, Kirihara thought, for him, it was the frilly blue apron. Seigaku thought Yukimura was feminine? Didn't they ever look at their own genius? Who happened to be holding a plate of delicious-smelling cookies. Kirihara was tired of all the anger in the room and actually felt thankful that this guy was here to relieve it.

"Yup," Fuji answered with a mischievous smile.

With a sigh, Kirihara snagged a cookie, and quickly muttered a thanks before taking a small bite.

Fuji put the plate on the desk. "But I helped."

"No!" Echizen shouted, reaching toward Kirihara.

Dammit, why was that brat shouting again? He dodged the swipe and shoved the entire thing in his mouth, away from Echizen. Choke. His tongue was dying. Choke. Were they trying to poison him?

His rush to the bathroom could have broken the sound barrier. The heaving wasn't too bad, he thought, bent over the bowl. Kirihara actually felt better after throwing up whatever deadly concocted baked good that was.

"Dear, are you alright?" It was a pleasant voice, a soft voice. Kirihara twisted around to see a pretty woman with warm brown eyes and a hesitant smile. She looked like Echizen's *mom*. He even saw the resemblance to the taller version of Echizen. The woman started

helping him up even though he hadn't answered her. "I haven't met you. Do you also play for Seigaku?"

Kirihara felt the tainted cookie in his throat when he heard her question and fought the urge to throw up at the thought of playing for Seigaku. "No, no. No. I'm uh, I'm actually from Rikkaidai."

Immediately, the warmth in her eyes died. "Oh," was all she said.

Kirihara wondered how much she knew about Echizen's struggles and if she'd hate him for having a part in it. He had grown quite used to hate. Didn't mean he liked it. "I actually have to go now," he said awkwardly as he started down the staircase, trying to avoid catching the attention of Echizen or his crazy guest.

"It's very nice of you to stop by anyway... I never got your name," she said with an embarrassed smile.

He wondered if giving her his name would be a stupid move. "Kirihara Akaya, ma'am."

She started walking down the stairs with him. "Ah, Akaya-kun, it's been hard for him, and I have yet to thank you for being his friend while he was in Rikkaidai." She sighed. "I can't imagine what he went through. He wouldn't tell me a thing."

Kirihara had a soft spot for mothers. And this mother, she was in pain. Because of him. No, not because of him; it wasn't all his fault. He shook his head to rid himself of those thoughts. Once he started sympathizing with the traitor's mother, who knows what could happen? "Uh, yeah," he answered a nonexistent question; he just didn't know how to respond. And he was not feeling guilty.

Straight through the nondescript living room toward the front door. At least she hadn't said a word. She was quiet and unobtrusive, just like Echizen. He stepped through the threshold and outside. Though *un* like Echizen, it didn't seem like the woman was planning to leave him

alone. Surely enough, the woman pulled the door closed behind them and put a warm hand on his arm.

"Well, have a good day, dear," she said kindly. Kiri-hara hadn't expected such hospitality from a relation of Echizen's.

"Echizen-san," he started to say before he lost his nerve, "If Echizen-kun wants to leave Rikkaidai, his best bet is meeting Yukimura at the Rikkai courts this afternoon. Around three." Was he betraying Rikkai for suggesting such a thing? Yukimura was most confident and fool-hardy after an hour or two of inconspicuously ordering everyone around at tennis practice. After watching with a critical eye, Kiri-hara concluded that Yukimura really was on a power trip. And during that time, it was most likely that Echizen would be able to get the permission to leave and never come back.

Kiri-hara left the porch without another word to the nice lady. He didn't think telling Echizen such a thing could be considered traitorous. After all, the kid was leaving Rikkaidai one way or another. What did it matter that he might be free to play for Seigaku once he left Rikkai? It shouldn't, Kiri-hara decided. He had faith in his team that they were good. Great.

He trusted his team, and he believed that no single person completely controlled a team's victory, because it was a *team*. Kiri-hara trusted that they'd all play to the best of their abilities, and the win was a team's win, not just for one or the select few. He trusted in Rikkai's abilities the way Yukimura used to, before Echizen had interrupted their lives.

"Have you come back to us, Echizen-kun?" Yukimura asked, having adopted his sweet temperament again. The boy had his tennis bag slung over one shoulder; he wasn't just here to talk. In the middle of their practice session too.

He glanced around his courts, noticing that everyone seemed tensed and surprised. Except Kiri-hara. He turned back to Echizen and

smiled. "Will you join us for the finals?" He didn't even want the boy back; he just didn't want the kid with Seigaku.

"You know why I'm here. I officially want out. Now." Out? Yukimura wasn't going to let him play for another team. Especially not at the Nationals.

The mask fell, and Yukimura threw away all pretenses at kindness. "Leaving the school so soon requires mutual repudiation. And the school won't throw you away, not as long as you're in good standing." Echizen was smart. Echizen was talented. Rikkaidai wasn't stupid enough to let him go, and Yukimura would make sure that Echizen wouldn't leave.

Everyone thought he was just a captain. But his own family was prestigious enough to effect change in the school. He knew that Kirihara's father was a large financial contributor to the school, and if Kirihara threatened to leave on account of Echizen, which Yukimura was sure he'd gladly do for the glory of Rikkai, the school would do whatever he wanted. And Genichirou and Yagyuu were both on student council and also had powerful families. The ones in his control with lesser lineage, like Marui, Jackal, Yanagi, and Niou, all had other significant contributions to the school that Rikkaidai couldn't bear to lose.

And Yukimura controlled them all. So let Echizen try to leave.

"Oh, but I'm not in good standing, Buchou," Echizen said with a pitiful smile. He was playing at something, Yukimura knew. "You see, last year, I damaged school property. You remember, the windows on the clubhouse? On purpose. And lied to Nishiki-buchou's face about it."

Echizen knew how to play this game. But damage to school property wasn't enough to get him kicked out. If there were some other offense, sure it would be grounds for expulsion, but just vandalism? Yukimura could easily work around that. He was about to point out

the weakness in Echizen's threat when the boy rudely held up a hand.

"Also, I was employed at a diner all last year. I'm still employed there. And I had no one's permission."

Dammit. Alone, underage employment probably wouldn't have been a problem. Well, Yukimura thought hastily, vandalism and working against school policy together were enough to get even Yanagi kicked out. He didn't let Echizen disturb his appearance of calm. "Even if the school wanted to expel you, it wouldn't."

From the slight slip of Echizen's cocky smile, he could tell that the boy's confidence was slipping as well. Perfect.

"You can try to set it in motion, but I'll stop it. You might be able to get away and enrolled in Seigaku, but not in time for the Nationals."

The boy looked unsure. Yukimura watched the boy change, though. Where there was once a hesitant child was now a bold young man. "I'll make you a bet."

Echizen did like bets, Yukimura smirked to himself as he remembered the indoor tennis courts. "What kind of bet, *Ochibi*?" he sneered. What a stupid nickname anyway. At Rikkaidai, he was the Prince, the Golden Eyes of Rikkai! But there with Seigaku? He was *Ochibi*. How embarrassing.

"We play a match," he started, "Tournament rules. If I win, you just have to send one little complaint to the administration and then stay out of the way. I'll handle everything else."

Ha! How stupid! Firstly, Echizen couldn't possibly win a game against him. Echizen didn't even know how to control the Muga! And who would demand such a thing? Writing 'one little complaint' wouldn't guarantee that Echizen could leave Rikkai. However, he considered, a really bad complaint, a criminal charge, would make sure that he wouldn't be accepted into Seigaku either.

Echizen couldn't win against him. So Yukimura didn't have to worry about doing anything, because his tennis was much more advanced than the smaller boy's.

"And if I win?" Because Yukimura would.

"I'll stay at Rikkai."

Hm. "Excuse me?" he asked, a little confused. What good could that possibly do for Echizen? Yukimura never made bets in which he was completely disadvantaged in one of the outcomes, so why would Echizen? What kind of idiot was this boy?

"I'll stay until I graduate my third year. I'll win all of my games for Rikkai and bring it another Nationals trophy next year."

Yukimura didn't want to trust this. But, he considered, Echizen was nothing like himself. Echizen was stupid and honorable enough that he would keep his word. But the boy was at least a little crafty. Either way, Yukimura couldn't lose. If, by some hell-freezing chance he should throw the game with Echizen, Yukimura had plenty of ways to make sure the kid wouldn't be able to join Seigaku anytime soon.

He could even bring Echizen up on charges that were much worse. Assault would be a good one. His team would certainly back him up if he said that the one who had punched him in the face a few days ago had been this Echizen. And if that didn't work, he had an entire tennis club of malleable members who would do anything for him. Genichirou would exercise his influence, and Yukimura was sure that weak-minded Kirihara would as well.

If he did nothing, Echizen would still end up at Seigaku eventually. And it was only this tournament that Echizen would miss. But that was all he needed, wasn't it? Next year, Seigaku would only have the bandana guy and the other loud one who didn't really stand out because of any talent he had. So what if they had Echizen next year? It's not like they had a chance of winning the next one.

Anyway, this was the only one that mattered to Yukimura. His third straight trophy.

He considered his options. Either one, he won and Echizen returned to Rikkaidai, ensuring another prosperous tennis season. Or two, he lost (an impossibility, anyway) and he makes sure that Echizen still can't play for Seigaku for the Nationals. Or three, he added mentally, he did nothing and Echizen joined Seigaku after the Nationals. Unless he did something, Echizen was leaving.

He couldn't lose.

"I do think we have a bet, then," Yukimura smiled disarmingly. "You win and you can transfer to Seigaku quickly enough to play in the Nationals" yeah right, he thought slyly, "And if I win, you stay at Rikkaidai and win us another trophy next year." He shrugged off his regular jacket, an action that everyone in Rikkai recognized. He was playing Echizen as an equal. At least, that's what Yukimura wanted him to think. Usually he wore it to make the other player feel inadequate. But he didn't need mind games for this, not against little Echizen.

Yukimura was going to crush him. "Sounds good," Echizen said confidently.

Yukimura wasn't sure what the boy was confident about. Did it really matter, he asked himself as he took his place by the net. "Rough or smooth?"

"Smooth." He let the racket drop, and it clattering to finality.

Hm. Things were already going his way. "Smooth. My serve." The fake smiles dropped away, revealing a warrior ready for battle. Ready to kill.

And now, this was the moment, wasn't it? Yukimura wondered if the boy could feel the eyes of Rikkai on him, watching enviously as Yukimura took him seriously. Oh, he knew at least Kirihara's eyes

were on the boy, because this was where Kirihara had always wanted to be. Staring across the net against a strong opponent taking him on sincerely, no games and no mocking.

And these golden eyes, the Prince of Rikkai, looked back at him, the Child of God. This boy, staring across the court intensely as if his whole future relied on the way the tennis ball bounced, could have been the golden eyed Prince of Rikkaidai. But he was willing to throw it all away for a juvenile group of children. Oh Echizen, he thought to himself, can't you see that your destiny lies with Rikkai?

He tossed the little ball up. *You think you belong with them, Echizen?* He stretched back, readying his serve. *You'll see.*

And had the first ace.

"Yukimura, 15-love."

I'll make your destiny.

Notes: So I hope the conflict feels genuine. I spent a lot of time just brooding about this chapter, as in while I was falling asleep, taking a shower, eating, riding the bus... and if you didn't notice, I really do like Kirihara. But I don't want to excuse him for what he's done. I'm even conflicted about him. Here's this chapter. The next one should be the end. Hopefully you won't kill me because of it. You might not expect the kind of ending I'm writing. Don't worry, no character deaths.

Next chapter: The Devil, the Tensai, and the Prince

The Future and Echizen Ryoma

Disclaimer: All characters belong to Takeshi Konomi

Warnings: Spoilers for the entire series and mature language

Notes: End! At the end of the chapter will be thank yous to reviewers, so this chapter isn't as long as it appears at first.

Eyes of Rikkai

by The Honorable Arik Novak

Gonna be late gonna be late gonna be late... his sneakers hit the pavement one by one in rapid succession as he pushed himself to go faster. If he showed up late, as he so often did for engagements like this... well, he didn't want to think about it. It was almost midnight. He slowed down as he reached his destination, which was surprisingly still lit, and caught his breath. He didn't want to look like he'd been rushing.

A little bell on the door chimed as he pushed it open. Since when did they get a bell?

"You're late," the man in the nearest booth said in a deadpan. He didn't look too troubled about it, though. Seated facing away from the door with a small shot glass loosely held with three fingers, he looked the perfect picture of a relaxed young man with no worries at all. Ryoma thought the man belonged in a bar, not a diner.

"No. You're early," Ryoma glared at him, noticing that he saw a jerky movement from the man in the booth. He took a seat opposite the brown-haired boy and scanned the new menu. "Did you order some *sushi* for us already? Anything?" he asked, breaking apart his chopsticks with awe. This was getting ridiculous. Sushi? Chopsticks? Alcohol?

His friend laughed. "Well, I did order, but I doubt it's anything you'd want to eat." He poured Ryoma a glass of whatever he was drinking and nudged it over.

Figures. Ryoma hesitantly sniffed the drink and was glad he did. Ugh. He snatched the bottle of alcohol and almost dropped it when he saw what was lying curled up on the bottom. "Fuji-senpai, what the hell?" A snake?

"Habushu. Sort of spicy, but the good kind."

Ryoma narrowed his eyes. "Every kind of spice is the good kind for you. I finally come back, and you try to murder me," he accused the irritating smiling genius. "And you ruin my restaurant." He was not pouting. No matter what Fuji-senpai could say, Echizen Ryoma did not pout.

Fuji-senpai shrugged. "I brought it with me to share, but if you'd rather not..." So at least the diner hadn't changed that.

"No thank you."

Fuji-senpai grinned and poured more of the foul-smelling poison into his own glass. "So Echizen-kun, how are classes treating you?"

It was Ryoma's turn to shrug. "It's not hard. My classmates complain a lot, though. We've started some of the clinical stuff, and while they're struggling with feeling incompetent in front of patients and our resident, I'm struggling with patient contact. I probably should've just stuck with research."

Fuji-senpai nodded in understanding. "I was wondering about that. You aren't the most personable kid around, but when you find someone you like, you just latch on," he said with a broad smile, probably remembering the months of distrust Ryoma had shown the Seigaku team when they sat in the very same booth.

Yeah, Ryoma thought sarcastically, he just couldn't let go. "And that's why I'm in America, sure."

"You're in America because we bought you shoes," Fuji-senpai said very matter-of-factly, unaware of the absurdity in his statement. Ryoma gave no credence to Fuji-senpai's superstitions.

"How is Tezuka-buchou?" Ryoma had graduated from Seigaku years ago, but he still called the man 'buchou,' because he was the only real captain Ryoma ever had.

Fuji-senpai's smile brightened, encouraging Ryoma to ask, "So he's back from Germany? I was talking to him a few weeks ago, but he'd only talk in German so I could improve. He says it's not fair that when I hang out with Roger we both speak English when *his* native language is German."

"Yes, Tezuka has always been thoughtful of others."

The bell on the door jingled, and it surprised him because he thought the diner was already closed for the night, and he'd never get used to it having a bell. He pushed it to the back of his mind, however, and scanned the menu. Everything there looked familiar, except sushi. And steak. Well, steak wasn't too surprising, the restaurant had steak back then too. But it never had Kobe beef.

"Did you give suggestions to the manager? Is that why there's a whole section just for ridiculously spicy food?" Ryoma asked, looking at the back of the menu. Indeed, there were three variations of the Heart Attack Heat and more absurd meals, some seasoned of wasabi and even one of bhut jolokia peppers.

Ryoma looked at Fuji-senpai because he wasn't answering. But the blue eyes weren't concentrated on Ryoma. No, they were concentrated on *him*. Standing awkwardly at the end of their table. Looking smart and proper in a suit.

"You didn't say Echizen was going to be here."

Ryoma turned his gaze toward Fuji-senpai so he could glare at him properly. "You planned this, you conniving..."

"Actually, not really. I was scheduled to meet here with Kirihara-san anyway, and since you never said you were flying in on Atobe's jet, which is much faster than the commercial ones, I had no idea you were coming in tonight. Then you called me, just this morning mind you, and I figured we could meet after the diner was closed and Kirihara-san left. But," Fuji turned to Kirihara with a pleasant smile, "Kirihara-san was very late." What was up with all this 'Kirihara-san'?

"I was busy at the office." Kirihara seemed unsure of where to sit, since he would have to sit beside Fuji or Ryoma if he took a place at the booth. It looked like he was deciding which was the lesser evil. "Don't just stand there, pull up a chair if you feel too uncomfortable sitting next to one of us," Ryoma said, irritated at Kirihara's lack of initiative. That would have been horrid bedside manner, Ryoma thought. The suggestion probably only made him more uncomfortable.

"Fuji tells me you're studying in America. What the hell happened to beating Federer? Did you give up?" Kirihara almost immediately wheedled him once he was seated awkwardly at the end of the table.

Ryoma shrugged. "Roger and I play every other weekend or so, since there are others I want to play. We're pretty much tied for wins, but I'm barely in the lead. Sometimes we play doubles against Robin, oh I mean Soderling, and whomever he has with him," he said simply. He didn't need to sound smug. He thought the fact that he was on a first name basis with some of the best and could convince nationally ranked tennis players to play him on the street courts of New York almost every weekend was enough to rankle the other boy. "It's way better than having to wait to play them in tournaments and I can just have fun."

Kirihara didn't look very happy. "You still on about all that '*have fun with tennis and everything will be sunshine and rainbows*'?" he asked cynically.

"It worked when I beat Yukimura, didn't it?" Ryoma asked cheekily. He observed Kiri-hara's quickly reddening face and wondered why Fuji had planned to meet him here in the first place.

"Echizen-kun is attending medical school in New York," Fuji quickly informed Kiri-hara before the angry man could explode. "And Kiri-hara-san has a very high position in KH Industries. Now that you two have caught up, we can have a comfortable, non-confrontational conversation, yes?" Fuji sent one of his glares toward Kiri-hara, and the other man reluctantly pulled out a business card.

"It's just an eight to five job, nothing special," Kiri-hara said, very self-deprecating. Ryoma didn't get it. The old Kiri-hara was arrogant and annoying. And what kind of eight to five job made him late for a meeting at midnight?

Ryoma looked at his old classmate up and down. A suit. A pretty expensive suit. The man's hair was better than it used to be, not the ugly nest of stray hairs. And his eyes were clear, even though he still looked incensed. It didn't seem he'd descend into Demon mode anytime soon. Ryoma took the business card and gave Kiri-hara a questioning look. "Since when is KH Industries spelled like 'seppuku'?" Ryoma may not have been born in Japan, but he could read Japanese.

"It's pronounced Kiri-hara."

Ryoma's eyes were glinting with amusement. "What's it like, working for a company that shares your last name?"

"Not that weird since my father's the CEO." Kiri-hara muttered with chagrin.

Ryoma slipped the card into his wallet, sure that he'd never have the need to look at it again. "Your father's crazy, naming a company like that."

"Actually, my grandfather. He changed the spelling of the family name after he created the company." Wow. That company must have been old.

Ryoma continued his analysis of this new Kirihara. "I never knew you were rich. I thought you were the kind of guy who'd throw it in people's faces."

Kirihara actually blushed and then glared at Fuji-senpai, as if he were the one forcing him to talk. He waved his hand dismissively and addressed Fuji-senpai. "Did you ever tell him that you were the one to fix his crazy mom?" He asked, probably just trying to get on Ryoma's nerves.

Ryoma maintained his calm, though now his eyes were smoldering. He thought they were past this juvenile baiting.

"No, I didn't. But thank you for telling him for me," Fuji said calmly, sipping his alcohol like it was tea. "Speaking of your family, how is Ryoga?" he asked, effectively shifting the conversation away from the more volatile topics.

Ryoma loosened his shoulders, unsure of when he had tensed them in the first place. "He's some kind of monk, maintaining the shrine. There's a house there that my mother and my cousin Nanako live in."

And the conversation was brought to a standstill. Fuji seemed satisfied with the way things were going, and Ryoma had a hard time believing that this all wasn't planned. "You know, I'm not fond of people plotting around me," he said pointedly at Fuji-senpai.

"He is quite like Yukimura, isn't he?" Kirihara smirked.

Ryoma agreed, much to Fuji's apparent irritation. "Even down to the feminine cut," Ryoma commented off-handedly, remembering how the entire Seigaku team recounted to him 'Ryoga's Revenge' as they had dubbed it.

"Now Echizen-kun, how Fuji-san chooses to style his hair is his own business," Kirihara snickered.

Is this how it would have been? Ryoma wondered if he and Kirihara could have been friends, if jealousy had never reared its ugly head. If Yukimura hadn't messed with them. Because for some reason, they were having a conversation and no one was shouting. "How is Yukimura anyway?" Ryoma asked cautiously. He wondered if this would be a sore topic. Yukimura was quite the embodiment of Rikkai Dai, and the school was the one point of contention and similarity between them. He himself had gotten over it, had moved on swimmingly, but had Kirihara?

The man seemed to swallow to bolster his courage, but he never let his gaze waver. "I wouldn't know. Haven't seen him since he graduated."

That troubled Ryoma. "You didn't keep in touch with him?" He always pegged Kirihara as the loyal one, with the kind of dedication Ryoma had only seen in Sanada.

"You're kind of oblivious, did you know that?" Kirihara abruptly asked. Now, Ryoma had no idea what he was talking about, and that only gave Kirihara's words more credence.

Kirihara didn't seem to know what to do with his hands, but he still would not lower his eyes. "After you beat him, he demanded that we step in, to stop the transfer process. You probably don't know it, but we all have some influence over the school. My father's a top contributor, and Sanada's name alone could force anyone's hand. It may not seem like it, but even Yanagi-senpai-

And Ryoma's eyes grew hard. They were alive and intense, but they were cold. Angry. But as always, his voice was controlled. "So? Now you feel guilty? It's been what, seven years? And now you feel the need to tell me that it was you and Sanada- *fukubuchou* who stopped me from playing for Seigaku?" It was still fresh, the anger he

felt when he realized that he had come back only to watch from the sidelines as his team lost.

"No," Kiri-hara said firmly. Still, he had not given himself the luxury of looking away from that chilly stare. "Yukimura asked us to hold up the process, but we kind... of... didn't. Anyway, he didn't even write a complaint against you. Hereally didn't want you playing for *them*," he said, nodding his head toward Fuji-senpai.

Now Ryoma was a little more confused. "But there was a complaint. Actually, the bare minimum. I was prepared to let Yukimura throw some really bad accusations around, but it was just the windows in the clubhouse." Not even the job was mentioned, Ryoma thought. "But I still didn't get into Seigaku in time. You're saying you had no part in that?"

Kiri-hara seemed to smile a bit. It was the barest hint of a smirk. "Nope. The bare minimum complaint? That was Sanada. He figured Yukimura ought to, you know, be honorable and crap like that. So *he* filed the complaint when Yukimura refused, and even when that wasn't enough, lobbied to have you kicked out, citing a bunch of times you caused trouble. But it was nothing that would hinder you getting into your touchy-feely school." There was the slightest hint of bitterness in Kiri-hara's voice, but it seemed to have mellowed with time. Or perhaps with Fuji's help. Ryoma noticed how Fuji-senpai and Kiri-hara were exchanging glances, usually with Fuji-senpai encouraging him to talk.

That must have been hard. Really hard, especially for Sanada. He remembered Yukimura's almost mindless followers and couldn't understand how they had all stood up against him. "But what about the Rikkai's 'must not lose' attitude? The loyalty? Sanada *you know*, he, Yukimura-"

"Yeah, we all knew how Sanada felt about Yukimura. But Sanada has this old-fashioned honor and stuff. And the Rikkaidai mindset really doesn't work when the leader loses and can't bear the consequences," Kiri-hara shrugged like it was nothing.

And maybe for him, it was nothing.

But for Ryoma, it was like a paradigm shift. Was that all it took to wrest control from Yukimura's fingers? But something still didn't make sense. "Then what happened at the Nationals?"

"A bitter, empty victory, my good sir," Kiri-hara sighed, bone weary. "I've no idea why you couldn't play for Seigaku. We all wondered the same thing. Then the next year, you wouldn't say a word to us. You just let Urayama chat your ear off while your stupid team beat mine to a pulp," Kiri-hara pouted, "We had to find out from *him* that you didn't get into Seigaku quickly enough, that it wasn't on our part that you didn't play for Seigaku in the Nationals the year before."

Ryoma was a little annoyed. He could have blamed it all on Yukimura's lackeys, but it turned out that they had tried to *help* him? How embarrassing. He had been ready to place the blame at Kiri-hara's feet for stopping his admission to Seigaku, but he knew it was irrational. They had nothing to do with it. "I wondered if it was purely by chance that the admission decision was halted until school resumed or if you guys had a hand in it..." Logically, Ryoma remembered that Seigaku had a legitimate reasons for accepting him as quickly as he would have liked it. But sometimes he was allowed to think emotionally.

"Nope, we did nothing. If anything, you should be *thanking* us, or you wouldn't have been able to leave Rikkai at all until the start of the school year. And what really stopped you from entering Seigaku as soon as possible anyway?" How embarrassing, Ryoma thought. There was no way he'd tell him why he had worked so hard and still failed.

"His age," Fuji said solemnly. Kiri-hara twitched, probably forgetting that the genius was there at all. Ryoma wasn't surprised; he had gotten used to noticing the silent ones. But he didn't think that Fuji would tell Kiri-hara everything he wanted to know.

"Most schools in Japan are very strict about not letting students skip grades, and the cut off for Echizen-kun's grade was quite a few months off," Fuji finished. Ryoma glared at his senpai, hoping that no other information had passed between them when he wasn't there. What would they have talked about if Kiri-hara had arrived earlier?

It was a terribly high-pitched tone that interrupted their conversation. Not even a song, as most cell phones had nowadays, but a standard boring ring tone. Kiri-hara pulled out a sleek black cell phone, a fancy one that Ryoma imagined had planners and internet and all sorts of useless gadgets on it. "I'm sorry, I have to take this," Kiri-hara said, and stood from his chair. The man actually walked out of the diner into the oppressive dark of night to take his call.

"He's different," Ryoma said, waiting only a second after the door closed behind Kiri-hara.

"Is it a good different?" Fuji-senpai asked.

Ryoma couldn't tell. Kiri-hara was less explosive. He hadn't once slammed his hands down or jumped up in anger. And the insults were at a minimum, almost nonexistent. "Yeah, I guess it is a good different. But now I'm not sure if that's Kiri-hara at all."

Fuji-senpai poured more habushu into his glass and tried to offer some to Ryoma. "No? Okay," and downed the whole thing with a smile and a satisfied sigh. "I met him at the trains. He was drunk."

Ryoma really didn't want to hear this. "So?" But his curiosity got the better of him.

"So the only hotel nearby was a love hotel which was awkward since he was passed out by then and it does *not* look good when you arrive at one of those establishments with an unconscious guy."

The bells. "Why are you telling him this story?" Kiri-hara groaned as he came back in. He stood by the booth, not taking his seat. Maybe he was offended enough to leave. Ryoma could hope.

Fuji-senpai responded with one of his brightest smiles, the kind that killed grudges and ended wars. "I thought it pertinent."

"Well, tell him whatever you like. I have to go back to the office."

"Really? It's almost one in the morning," Ryoma reminded him. Who worked until one in the morning?

Kirihara rolled his eyes. "It happens," he said, shrugging it off. He pulled his blazer off the back of the chair, though Ryoma had never noticed him taking it off in the first place. "Well, Echizen, this reunion wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be. Actually, it was pretty good."

"Really?" Ryoma didn't think it went *that* well.

"Yeah. I didn't throw anything, you didn't throw anything, we didn't shout or argue, and I didn't throw up. So all in all, not too bad. Doesn't mean I want to meet up with you again. I'd rather not, actually. This is enough for me." So turning, he donned his jacket and looked straight at Fuji-senpai. He extended his right hand for Fuji to shake, and genuinely smiled when Fuji took it in a firm farewell handshake. "I must thank you again, Fuji-san."

"My pleasure, Kirihara-san. Always here to help."

And with that, Kirihara left, the chimes singing behind him.

"You fixed him," Ryoma stated, his eyes still watching the bells half-heartedly ring.

Fuji crossed his arms and nodded, more to himself than for Ryoma's benefit. "Not fixed. But talking it out with a trained professional has really helped him."

"Does Kirihara know that you're not licensed to be a psychotherapist?"

Fuji looked offended. "Just because I'm not licensed doesn't mean I'm not qualified, Ochibi-chan."

"Sitting in on my psychology class for one afternoon does not make you qualified, Fuji-senpai."

"And getting a masters in it does?"

"Well, yes."

"I disagree."

"Doesn't matter if you disagree. It's the way the world works." Ryoma should have known that Fuji wouldn't let him have the last word. The inane conversation continued on through the night until Ryoma felt it was okay for him to let his eyes rest for a little while. Jet lag. But Fuji continued talking, his soft voice floating on the air as he drifted off...

"I know you're sleeping, Ochibi, but you're so cute like that." Fuji-senpai? Sounded like his voice. "Did you know you snore? Hm. Minato-san left quite a while ago, since he trusts you to lock up. I'll remind you when you wake. You really handle donigh splendidly, bedda than I woul' have thoughd. Kirriharra really beneftd fromthiswholeconversashun, an lthinkyoosotoo whi silr musfoph rlo..."

Ryoma looked around. Oh, the courts. The Nationals? No, he was at Rikkaidai. And there was Yukimura, across the net. His face twisted into a hateful sneer, the likes of which Ryoma couldn't have imagined. This was a memory. "You might've won this, Echizen, but your damned foolish team will never take the Nationals from Rikkaidai!" He was angry.

Ryoma was in shock. Had he won? Really? He won against the Child of God. Wow. He remembered this feeling, this triumphant feeling. But it was a feeling of loss. Because that boy across the court was supposed to be his captain. He was supposed to be

supportive and caring, and Ryoma had realized over the course of their game that Yukimura was neither.

And even though he played against Yukimura, he had found the third door, hadn't he?

Fun. It sounded ridiculous, but it was true. "Fun..." he muttered to himself.

"Ochibi? Are you awake?" A breeze across his bangs. "I guess not. You know, the only bad thing about you sleeping ?" Ryoam could feel himself gaining awareness . "I can't see your eyes. You have no idea how expressive your eyes are. The moment I met you, I could tell there was something we could do to help. And I was willing to let them help you. Did they? At all?"

They made me stronger, didn't they? Then did Seigaku make me weak? It had been years since he graduated, and Ryoma still asked himself, what if? What if he stayed at Rikkaidai? What if he had started at Seigaku? What if this reality had never happened?

"Don't worry, Echizen-kun. I'll stay until you wake up. Or until the sun rises. Then, you'll have to get up or else Minato-san will surely kill me." Chuckle.

No, Seigaku made him stronger.

"Yo Echizen."

Ryoma turned around, and there was Kirihara. Young, happy, energetic. His hair was messy as always and his eyes were bright, excited. "We still on for Saturday? Marui-senpai and Jackal-senpai want to come too."

Ryoma was nervous. An excuse, he needed an excuse. "You don't think Yukimura-buchou will be annoyed that we're not practicing?"

Kirihara waved his hand in dismissal. "Buchou won't mind. Remember, he wanted us to have fun since we worked so hard to win Nationals."

"But still, to slack off..."

Kirihara slung his arm over Ryoma's shoulders, and for some reason, he didn't mind. Everything felt right. "You worry too much, Echizen-kun. You don't see me worrying, right?"

Ryoma rolled his eyes. "And that's why you're failing English, my friend. I'd be better off studying on Saturday," Ryoma quickly changed the subject. "No, I think I ought to stay home, since you know..." Everything was getting closer to the truth.

Kirihara sent him an empathetic smile. "I do know. Really, I do. But sometimes you gotta get out and have some fun instead of wasting away in that apartment of yours. You know what, bring your mom too. It's a good movie for all ages."

Ryoma really had no way to excuse himself now without giving Kirihara the real truth. He hesitated in his step and finally just stopped walking.

"Hey Echizen-kun, if it's about money, you know we always got your back-"

"I'm tired of having to rely on you guys! I can take care of myself, I'm not weak. You don't always have to butt in where you're not needed," Ryoma said, since Kirihara had finally reached the heart of the matter. He started walking again, with quicker steps this time, because he didn't want Kirihara to see him so embarrassed.

But Kirihara grabbed his wrist, stopping him mid-step. "It's not weak to rely on your friends. We're here for you, just like you all are there for me when I need it. Stop being so arrogant for once, and realize that you don't need to do everything alone when there are people to help you!"

Ryoma felt himself jerk a bit, but still stood there, someone's hand on his wrist. Or was he sitting? He felt himself hover for a second, realizing that he must have been dreaming. Of another universe, maybe. Another life that Ryoma never had. But he couldn't change it. He had moved on from Rikkaidai, even from Seigaku. He was older and wiser, but still, sometimes Ryoma felt that he needed people like Fuji-senpai who continued to mutter into the night.

Standing amongst the people of his past, Ryoma stared forward. And even then, the bells that followed the man he knew as Kirihara were mixed with drums beating and horns blaring.

Notes: It's all over, folks. Hope you enjoyed the ride. And I hope you're not too angry about me not going too deeply into the Yukimura/Echizen game. I rather like this ending, and I wonder how many people could have predicted it. (But really, I'm aiming for some realism. Having Ryoma play for Seigaku and win would be too perfect, and I thrive on angst). I must give out thank yous to all the reviewers of previous chapters who kept me writing. For the one-time reviewers, thank you: Rawrsaysthefrickin'dinosaur, HarryPotterObsessed44, loveless0097, alchino, abandoned-angel-of-fire, lolgirl607, Babag, Purple-flavored-gum my bear, haruhi, BlackTimberWolf, 10-iz4, Latd1, yuki, Tsubame0104, pchan, Anonymous, larigato, Serebabe, Curious reader, BleuFleur, LFan4Ever, VersarFfion, wtfh, ghostdevil13, Ishkabod, ice flow, moonlightskymist, MysteriousEyez, KitsuneNaru

People who reviewed between 2 and 4 times: LxLightDeathNote. Kpopluvr, ryoka-chan, hikaru, Lyricalia, rianifitria, itachifangirl12424, fallenangel19413, Thai Tea Addict, gossipgirl21, FiOeX, Shulamit, Mimi, skidney1, Dark Crystal Usagi, aikenichi11, Doseimotsuko, Itachisgurl93, tvsk75

5 and 6-time and reviewers: Huginn et Muninn, Kina-san, Nameless Little Girl, EdxWinry6789, Clow Angel, Reviewer, skepsis66, Amy-sama90, fasyahime, Pri-Chan 1410

7, 8, 9 and 10-time reviewers: Me (10), DarkAndStormyNight (9), denizen of the night (9), what the gaaah (8), Polaroid Fixation (7; your long reviewers need a special mention, since I really, really loved them), Full Manga Alchemist (7)

People who really stuck with me!: hysterical laughter (14), HiKaRi-ChIbI (13), Lucathia Rykatu (13), hyperdude (12), .rain (12), soni-chan (11), tsub4ki (11; also, thank you for your help with my computer)

Sorry for the super long author's note. There will not be a sequel, sorry! But there might be a companion piece focusing solely on Kirihara and Fuji, again no pairings. I also might start working on an Avatar: The Last Airbender fanfic about Zuko, but we'll see. Hopefully I see some of you readers again. And a huge thank you to anyone who has spent time leaving a review or reading my story.